

Polaris Translations



Tank Minus Four

Sukinasaki Saki's Unstoppable Major Activities

1

Erm... This is a problem. What can I even say to this?

For now, allow me to offer my condolences.

It's amazing. You really haven't betrayed my expectations in how much of a betrayer you are. Or, well, because you're a betrayer, perhaps it's more correct to say that you *have* betrayed my expectations in how much of a betrayer you are... In any case, you really managed to turn this Anshin'in-san pale with shock.

To think that, even though this game may as well have been a rigged match, you would end up dropping out in just the second stage... What am I supposed to do with the third and last stages, that I put together with all my heart?

You've managed to lose in a way far below my expectations.

I can't even say that you hit rock bottom, because it's like there's no bottom for you to hit. You really can be called a good loser, huh.

By the way, the term "good loser" is technically supposed to refer to someone who's a "good sport about losing", but I'm choosing to interpret it as someone who "makes a spectacle out of losing"—although, regardless of the meaning, it seems like you don't have any hesitation

when you lose.

It's like you're partaking in a lavish banquet of loss, or perhaps the mess left behind after the party (or the *loss* left behind)—ah, but even if I make such a play on words, it's pointless in front of you.^[?]

I'd definitely taken into account that extreme defeatism of yours when coming up with this game, but it's almost as if you casually saw through my predictions—and you ended up dropping out, as if you were just making fun of me.

No, no, I understand very well that you had no intention of doing so. However, dropping out despite having no intention to do so is really what makes you as frightening as a Demon Lord. Although, if you really were a Demon Lord, you wouldn't have dropped out at only Stage 2... If we were to put such a half-assed development in terms of the shonen manga that you love, then it would totally be as if this manga had just been canceled. Well... It's still very much like you, even including that, though.

Anyway.

Kumagawa-kun, I'm not at all the type of person to just abandon you and throw everything out the window. At the very least, I'll give you some sort of explanation—you'll probably be enthralled at my omniscient, omnipotent sweetness. The look on your face is saying that this is a favor you don't particularly want, but, well, you could say giving out unnecessary favors is a hobby of mine, so play along for a bit, won't you?

Naturally, since you've lost at this game, you'll be expelled from Suisou Academy... But I suppose I should explain why.

Most people end up dying without really knowing the reason why they're dying, so you really are a lucky guy to be able to hear the reason directly from me—although if I say it like that, you'll just get mad at me. You certainly are more lacking than you are lucky—ahaha, that's just another play on words.^[?]

Although, while we're on that subject, I'd say that your guiding principles of, "People are born without meaning, live without relations, and die without worth", is nothing more than a play on words, too... Well, I've already debated you to the end on that matter, so we don't need to go

over it again.

Let's review the second stage.

I'd like to say that you could use this as a reference if you happened to have any continues... But unfortunately, no matter how much you're like Mario with infinite lives, this game has no continues.

I told you there was no overtime, right?

When you lose, that's the end of the game. Game over, game over. It's the same with your life. So do your best to use this as a reference for your life from now on. That is, if you have a life from now on.

Yakeishi Kushi.

Class 1-3, seat number 31, Yakeishi Kushi—that girl, who works as the manager of the *Kendo* Club and the *Iaido* Club, was also the childhood friend of your subordinate. You know, that girl named, ah, something something something. Ah, yes.

Sukinasaki Saki.

Or was she your partner, and not your subordinate?

That's what you said in front of Utsubogi—the scheme I'd set up for the second stage was to have you face off against her.

No, it wasn't just me being mean.

You could say it was just unfortunate.

I'd been thinking that you were relying a little too much on her power when you cleared Stage 0 and Stage 1—and, to tell you the truth, the change of plans arose as a result of me wanting to look into that.

I mean, you've already noticed, haven't you?

Even though you're sitting arrogantly atop the seat of Student Council President, you're nothing more than her puppet.

You may have heard the term "puppet government" before, but right now, you're actually making that a reality—just like our time in middle school,

our time at Hakobune Middle School.

That time—that time you became the Student Council President with a zero-percent approval rating, you had basically turned into a yes-man for me, the Not Equal. Well, Maguro-kun was essentially guilty of the same crime for having promoted you, but even so, at that time, I believe you were indeed an accomplice for me and Maguro-kun.

But now, you really are nothing more than just a puppet being manipulated by that girl, aren't you? You're just like a living marionette. Although, if you end up being completely controlled, then it would basically be as if you were dead.

According to the investigation that I had my terminal do, the terminal that was originally supposed to be in charge of the third stage, Sukinasaki-san's Skill is called "Error Message Plate"—and I can guess at what her personality is like by the way that Skill of hers "manifests".

She is, most likely, the mastermind type of character.

She hates standing out in center stage, but she also hates to content herself with being ruled over—and it might be a bit like the pot calling the kettle black when it comes to describing her as the mastermind type of character, but really, I wouldn't say that I'm as much of a mastermind as she is.

Because I'm a nice person.

But what I was curious about was why you were fine with being manipulated by a girl like that, and I was hoping I'd be able to figure that out through my approach in Stage 2, but unfortunately, it doesn't seem like that wish will be granted—well, even so, I've said this from the beginning.

The act of standing over others is more suited to the weak.

And if that's the case, then there's no one more suited than you to stand over others—although, now that you've lost in this game with me, you'll have to drop out from that position as well.

I mean, I'm actually very reluctant to let this happen.

It's rather unfortunate that you've made such a waste of the game that I went through all that trouble to put together, and it's also rather unfortunate that you'll end up being expelled from Suisou Academy in the state you're in.

Although, I did say at the start that "my goal was to have you thrown out of Suisou Academy"—but to be honest, I wasn't very strongly fixated on that goal. If anything, that was just a secondary goal.

As for what my real goal was, it was really to confirm how far that defeatism of yours would really go—

Well, at this point in time, I still haven't fulfilled that goal.

Indeed.

I wonder if that means that this becomes something that's "impossible" for me? If so, then considering I've lived for three trillion years, it ended up being found in quite a disappointing way.

No, I'm referring to myself here.

Not to mention, I don't actually think that at all.

It's not as if I didn't anticipate that this would happen.

You're looking for a Skill to completely seal me—or rather, completely defeat me—and it seems like you've been going from school to school in search of a Skill Holder capable of defeating me. And while I don't know if that's really what you're thinking, is it possible that you think that that Sukinasaki-san is that "somebody"?

Well, even if your "Book Maker" that you let me hold onto (or rather, that I confiscated from you) happened to be the only Skill that could affect me, you can't exactly say it was a Skill that defeated me—"Book Maker" has a huge weak point in that, as long as you are alive, I can't die, either. Well, if I'm saying that much, then the Skill "Book Maker" itself could be described as one big weak point that's very much like you.

Well.

If you ask me, it's impossible to defeat me with any sort of Skill, so what

you're doing right now is just a waste of effort—and if you're clinging to Suisou Academy for a reason like that, then it might actually be best for you if I gave you your final notice.

Go on and leave Suisou Academy already.

Go on.

I need to have you settle things with Medaka-chan, after all.

In any case, a promise is a promise, so I'll ready my terminals at once and start preparing to kick you out of Suisou Academy—and I'll just say this in advance, but from this point on, it's no longer a game. We're not playing around anymore. The flow of the story is no longer in my hands, so I can't use my discretion anymore—right now, you have no choice but to let the position of Student Council President be taken away from you. Don't think too badly of me for it—or rather, I'd be happy if you would be grateful to me for it.

After all, it was fundamentally impossible.

And fundamentally unsuited for you.

This prestigious school named Suisou Academy—although, on that note, it's not like there's a school in the world that could suit you at all.

You say that my hobby is to make my friends wear clothes that don't suit them, but it's not like there are clothes in this world that *do* suit you.

Kumagawa Misogi.

You're just a naked Demon Lord—

■ ■

Aah.

Aah, aah, aah.

Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaah.

And so, I, Sukinasaki Saki, ended up fucking being forced into a place I couldn't get out of—since that Kumagawa guy was gonna be forced out of Suisou Academy, I was forced into a place I couldn't get out of.

I couldn't fucking go on like this anymore, but it was still fucking something I had to do.

Acting all cute... Keeping on that mask of a “meek and timid girl that happened to get involved”? There wasn't really any more reason to keep that up.

Or rather, I didn't fucking have the time to keep up appearances anymore.

Anyway, things really turned to shit, huh.

I managed to save my childhood friend, Kushi-chan, from getting fucked over, but instead I was gonna end up losing that Minus bastard I put in that Jakago chick's place—and at this rate.

That absolutely wasn't what I wanted.

It was fucking inconvenient for me.

If the guys at the top kept switching around like this, then the one thing that I wanted—the peace of this academy—would be impossible to maintain. It would make this school unstable as hell.

Whether it's trash or garbage or even Minuses, an organization needs someone at the top to go on—riffraff needs to have a riffraff-like leader or else. Of course, I was eventually gonna cut off that Kumagawa guy (and preferably, his head) in the end, but this wasn't the time for that anymore.

Even for a short-lived rule, this was way too fucking short.

It woulda been fine if he'd stayed as my puppet for at least an entire term—I dunno who the fuck “Anshin'in-san” is and I don't even care if she doesn't go to this school, but if she's gonna get in my way, then I'll take

her on.

I dunno if she's omniscient or omnipotent or outside of humanity or whatever, but I'm not the kind of girl that gets scared by that shit—and in the first place, I'm sick of her using Kumagawa as a shield and hiding in that fucker's shadow all the time.

I'll be the one to give it to her straight. It's time for Sukinasaki Saki, the one who rules over the rulers, to show what she's really made of.

The way I talk might get a little rough and difficult to hear, but you're just gonna have to put up with it. And while I'm at it, I may as well apologize for lying and dressing myself up in what I've been telling you up until now.

Sorry.

Well, saying that I'll show what I'm made of isn't something that can be misunderstood, but it's not like everything up until now was a total lie—after all, whenever you talk with someone, whenever you talk to someone, you're always gonna make yourself sound a little better, and you're always gonna wear a disguise when talking to others. There's no one that doesn't do that.

And for me, that disguise would be the mask I usually wear—since by hiding my mouth, it makes my expressions harder to read and all. Well, it it's not like it was only for that simple reason, either... At least, it's for sure that it wasn't for allergies.

Yesterday, after school, when I faced off against Kumagawa on that rooftop—when I slipped in a lame-ass way and ended up slaughtering Kumagawa from an unforeseen accident—I'd been wearing an anime mask that I borrowed from the Manga Society.

Even that in itself was a disguise.

That reminds me, this isn't about anime, but have you ever wondered why *tokusatsu* hero shows always have heroes that hide their faces? Although, it's more like they're hiding their identity.

It was really mysterious to me when I was a kid.

Even though they were doing good deeds, was there really a need to hide their identity—didn't you ever think, like, maybe they have something they're ashamed about?

Of course, there were cases where it actually was needed.

For example, for the famous Kamen Rider, the traces of his reconstruction surgery showed up on his face whenever he activated his Rider powers, so he wore a mask to hide that—well, even so, in most cases, it's not really clear why those heroes hide their identities.

It's all stuff like, it'll cause a panic, or be unnecessarily confusing—but as I grew older, I pretty much figured out the reason why they did all that.

When you're doing good deeds, it just means you're standing out, and in a bad way—as long as you're human, as long as you're an individual, then you can't stay as “just that”.

There's no such thing as a human that can only do good deeds—like there's no such thing as a human that can only do bad deeds. So basically, they're wearing a disguise to divide those two sides, to *get people to only see one side of them*.

Although that totally isn't the reason I wear a mask normally. My reason is, pfft, let's call it hiding my embarrassment.

Since I hate being on center stage. I fucking hate it.

And I really, really didn't want to take on the General Affairs Manager role in the Student Council Executive Committee, either—it's something I had no choice to do to set up Kumagawa as the President, and I planned on having someone else take over at some point.

Never thought Kumagawa would be the one to drop out first—no, no, no.

It's not totally impossible that that bastard is actually feeling relieved at all this, that he's thinking that a burden was lifted from after losing. But that's not gonna fucking fly at *Chez Sukinasaki*.

It's a pain in the ass if the Student Council President's gonna quit on me unless I'm the one that decides it—well, ultimately it's not that much of a pain, but it still pisses me off.

It's pretty amazing that you got me to move towards betraying Kumagawa through the motive of protecting Kushi-chan, but "Anshin'in-san", you've made one big mistake. No, it isn't just one, it's a ton of mistakes.

You didn't understand what it meant to get me involved in your game—not even the Student Council, the faculty room, or even Kushi-chan had been able to peel my mask off.

That means I'd been able to stay hidden behind the scenes just fine up until now—but right now, I ended up participating midway in your little game, even if it was partially by force. And whether it was midway participation or barging into this war, *since I ended up winning*, I'm gonna have to take over this game.

And so, we're gonna begin the bonus stage.

I'll take Kumagawa's place and continue this game.

"Hello? Kushi-chan?" I said.

It was the following day—the day after I stabbed Kumagawa to death, although as a matter of fact, it was actually "today"—when I called up Kushi-chan first thing in the morning.

Since I was all alone in this Student Council office.

I had to come to school at this hour for my Student Council General Affairs Manager duties anyway, but Kushi-chan was probably still at home—it was that early in the morning.

And Suisou Academy's *Kendo* Club and *Iaido* Club didn't have morning practices, after all.

I hated abusing proverbs like this, but it was pretty much like, the early

bird gets the worm, or whatever—if I didn't clear this fucking game as soon as possible, then that Kumagawa guy was gonna quit school while I was sitting around doing nothing.

I didn't really have a reason, but he had the sort of image that made it seem like he'd be really quick to evacuate—well, outside of that, you could also say that I wanted to confirm Kushi-chan's safety, too.

Yesterday, after declaring to Kushi-chan that I'd act in her place, I had her go home after school as fast as possible, but there was no guarantee that nothing happened afterwards.

Kushi-chan herself said that nothing like that was gonna happen, but maybe "Anshin'in-san" would get mad at her. And it would be great if all she did was get mad at her, but it wasn't impossible that she'd lay down some sort of punishment.

Maybe I was just worrying over some tiny-ass details, but it's because I carefully cut off those tiny-ass possibilities that I was able to get where I am now.

"Yesterday, did anything happen to you afterwards?"

My tone of voice was the one I usually used. The tone of voice of Kushi-chan's childhood friend and senpai—well, it all turned out like this because of my strategy, so it wouldn't do anything to vent my anger on Kushi-chan, so it'd be a huge fucking waste if I scared her off here by getting all violent on her.

Although, in terms of the results, you could frame it as "Anshin'in-san" having made good use of Kushi-chan by getting me to murder Kumagawa, so it wouldn't be totally venting if I just complained to Kushi-chan. But, well, it wasn't gonna do anything if I complained to Kushi-chan, anyway.

It would just be too much of a waste of effort.

Besides, I had a request that I wanted to make of Kushi-chan, too—I needed her to act as the bridge between me and "Anshin'in-san".

"Ah, um, there wasn't anything," answered Kushi-chan. "Or rather, was everything all right on your end, Sukinasaki-senpai? I've been worrying

about what happened ever since I had you take my place—I was thinking that, in the end, I should've been the one to receive whatever was in store. Since it was my job from the beginning..."

"Don't worry, everything about that is already done and over with, so it's fine, Kushi-chan—and I didn't get injured or anything, either..."

This wasn't even a lie.

It was completely true that I hadn't received even a single injury, and if anything, it was Kumagawa that was the one that died... Well, it makes it sound like a huge incident if I talk about it so coldly like that, but really, whether or not Kumagawa died didn't matter all that much when he had "All Fiction" to use—what was important was the fact that Kumagawa had to drop out of the game.

And only on the second stage, at that...

I straightforwardly let Kushi-chan know the details—of course, taking care to do so in a way that wouldn't worsen my image.

"Is, is that so..."

Kushi-chan's voice went quiet for a single moment, but she soon followed up.

"That's Sukinasaki-senpai for you!" she said with a bright voice. "That Kumagawa bastard wasn't even a match for you! I didn't know you had such a way with swords! I really underestimated you!"

"Ahaha..."

It was a hollow laugh.

I couldn't help but think, it's nice that Kushi-chan lived such a simple life—and I wasn't trying to ridicule her or anything. In fact, I actually liked that about her. And she was saying something like "Kumagawa bastard" again—that's quite a way to talk about someone you've never met, was what I was thinking.

"It seems like it was the right choice to leave it to you, huh, Sukinasaki-senpai! After this, you're going to be the Student Council President

starting tomorrow, right! This *coup d'état* was a great success!”

“A *coup d'état*...”

This isn't a fucking joke.

I would rather die than become something like the Student Council President—maybe it was something I had to do for the sake of the academy's peace, but for someone like me, who fundamentally had something wrong with her humanity, I didn't have the rights to stand at the top of an organization.

Well, they had the same problems, but Jakago or Kumagawa were much more suited for Student Council President than I was.

I knew myself very well.

“I'm not going to become the Student Council President, Kushi-chan.”

“Eh? Is that so? Th, then... Am I going become the President?”

“Why.”

Why the hell would you arrive at that conclusion.

She was more shameless than I thought, this childhood friend of mine.

I tried running a simulation in my head of what would happen if I set up Kushi-chan as the Student Council President... But it was just too hard to imagine. Rejected.

“Um, anyway...” I said, forcing the conversation along. “Kushi-chan. Do you mind listening to a request of mine?”

“A request? What is it? If it's a request from you, Sukinasaki-senpai, then... Since I had you take my place and all, I'd love to return the favor in any way I can. Feel free to ask for anything!”

“Well, um, it's hard for me if you get all fired up like that, since it's nothing that big a deal...”

No, from Kushi-chan's perspective, this was probably going to be quite a “big deal”—quite an “outrageous” request that I was going to make of her,

so if she was going to talk like that even when she didn't need to... Well, it was on her if she backed out now.

I'd prefer if she would do this with as least eagerness as possible.

In any case, what I was about to ask of her was, to put it into words, just a simple intermediation.

I didn't wanna be a bother to Kushi-chan at all—and I didn't wanna get her involved, either. If I did, it would just make me acting in her place meaningless.

"Kushi-chan. From now on, I'm thinking about acting in Kumagawa-kun's place to continue the game, so do you think you could let 'Anshin'in-san' know?"

"Eh?"

It seemed that it was a completely unexpected request for Kushi-chan, as her eyes went wide—well, we were on the phone, so her eyes going wide was just me guessing, but in any case, I continued to press her before she could speak.

"I know it's a bit much to ask after all this, and I'd like to apologize for it, Kushi-chan—but if 'Anshin'in-san' really does have the type of personality that you say she does, then I think she would have seen through the plan of me participating in the game in your place."

"Um.... Uh, that's..."

For a moment, it seemed like Kushi-chan wanted to say something, but because she was a terminal, because she was "the person herself", she of course knew what "Anshin'in-san" was like—so it didn't seem like she was able to refute what I said.

Even if the plan hadn't been leaked out.

She would certainly have—seen through it.

But the reason she couldn't just agree to it was because, if she agreed now, that meant she'd have to face the fact that her own wrongdoing was already known by "Anshin'in-san"—mm, well, as for that, I'll need her to

figure all that out on her own.

And let's just ignore the fact that I tricked her into thinking otherwise.

I continued to talk.

"I believe that 'Anshin'in-san' had the goal of making me take your place from the beginning—this was something I realized just this morning."

That was a lie.

This was something I knew from the beginning, and I just played along with the picture 'Anshin'in-san' painted—since I didn't have very many options, I'd had to balance Kumagawa and Kushi-chan on the scales and eventually picked Kushi-chan.

I think that the fact that I didn't get too conflicted about that was one of my (few) good points, but I'm not the type of girl who boasts about her own good points.

"She wanted to make you take my place...? Are you saying that's why she ordered me to become the guard for Stage 2...? Knowing that I was your childhood friend? Her goal was to make you betray Kumagawa?"

There were a few things she was missing, but Kushi-chan, being slightly cleverer than average, was able to quickly guess at everything with the small hint I gave her—good for her. If her personality was just a little more cautious, then maybe it wouldn't feel like a joke to let her take over as Student Council President... No, even for me, it just didn't feel right to use my childhood friend as a puppet.

Although that kindness of mine was what "Anshin'in-san" had poked at this time around—in the end, was it just about how people could get tripped up by their own sense of moral obligation? Nah, but it wasn't even the end at all.

This game was still going.

"It's probably like that, I'm sure."

"That's, that really does seem like something Anshin'in-san would do... To utilize the feelings of love between me and Sukinasaki-senpai!"

“Um, you mean feelings of friendship, right?”

I wish she wouldn't make dangerous statements like that. That in itself could pose a threat to our friendship.

“But, if *that* was what 'Anshin'in-san' intended as the gamemaster—*that* would be the fact that 'taking someone's place' was implicitly acknowledged as part of the game's rules. And if so—”

If so.

“—It should be allowed for me to take Kumagawa-kun's place to continue this game.”

“...? Would it really be allowed? Since Kumagawa ended up being defeated by you as my representative... Ah, but maybe it works if we think of it like a tournament that you're advancing through?”

“If we want to strictly stick to the rules, then of course the game was over when Kumagawa-kun lost—assuming there no rule for losers to be revived. But, from what I can tell of what you and Kumagawa-kun told me about this 'Anshin'in-san', she seems like the type that would enjoy irregular things like this.”

Well, I did think that she had that kind of personality, but I didn't know whether or not this was all that irregular or not. It was possible I was just playing along with the picture she painted again—it would make me feel shitty if I was just playing straight into her expectations, but it would be even more shitty if I was just forced to retire like this.

“Of course, I know this is a bit obstinate of me, and if she ends up coldly rejecting me by saying that it's against the rules for an outsider like me to continue the game, then that's the end of that, but please, Kushi-chan. Could you please go and check with 'Anshin'in-san'? Whether or not it's allowed for me to continue this game... To take on Stage 3 and Stage 4.”

“It's... It's fine if I just go and check, right?” Kushi-chan said dubiously. “If

Anshin'in-san ends up rejecting you, then what should I—”

“If that happens, you don’t need to do anything. Since I’ll give up.”

That was also a lie. It was important for humans to give up at times, but I wasn’t gonna give up just from something like that—I was just gonna come up with another approach.

I just didn’t want to ask too much of Kushi-chan.

“Understood, Sukinasaki-senpai... But right now, Anshin'in-san is in the condition of having been sealed by Kumagawa Misogi, so it’s hard for me to contact her from my end. So I don’t know if I’ll be able to get a response immediately.”

“Ah, is that so...”

She did say something about being sealed before, too.

Although, since she was pretty freely and incessantly appearing in Kumagawa’s dreams all the time, it was easy to forget that something like that had happened.

That meant that, while I was waiting for a response from Kushi-chan, my plans would have to turn to the trouble of trying my hand at other things. Although, I didn’t think that troublesome things were really all that troublesome.

“All right, that’s fine. Then, I’ll leave it to you. But you don’t need to overdo it, Kushi-chan.”

To be honest, I’d actually prefer it if she overdid it just a little, but it wasn’t like I could just say that now.

Fortunately, Kushi-chan just said, “Don’t worry, you can count on me,” in response.

Was it as they say, a good friend is a great blessing?

Well, it was because of that friend that I was cornered into this situation I couldn’t escape from in the first place...

Having those complicated feelings in my mind, I hung up the phone.

■ ■

[Oh, Saki-chan. You're early today.]

At almost the exact moment I hung up, Kumagawa entered the Student Council office—he came in with such fucking perfect timing that it almost made me wonder if he'd just been waiting outside the door, eavesdropping on my conversation.

In a panic, I put back on the mask that I'd taken off—since I'd been talking with my back to the door, it was all right, Kumagawa probably hadn't noticed.

[What's gotten you all hot and bothered? Ever since you learned that I like girls who get all hot and bothered, you've recently become a pretty clumsy girl that gets hot and bothered pretty frequently, and it's really cute.]

Seeing as he was saying things that went beyond incomprehensible and into the realm of utterly disgusting, it seemed like he hadn't heard me talking to Kushi-chan over the phone.

"Ku, ku-ku-ku, Kumagawa-kun!"

Well, as irritated as I was, I did my best not to make any strange retorts, acting the part of the flustered girl that Kumagawa liked so much. What the hell was I doing?

"You're pretty early, too, Kumagawa-kun. Wha, wha, what's up?"

[Am I that early? I feel like I'm always here at this time, though—well, you know, I ended up losing in the Anshin'in Game and all.]

He entered the room as he spoke. But instead of going for the desk, he walked towards the sofa and lay down on it—by now it was like the sofa was where he usually belonged.

[I need to start getting ready to withdraw from the Student Council office, now—from the Student Council office, and then from Suisou Academy. Aw man, what school should I attack next? I mean, what school should I visit next?]

“.....”

[Aw man. It's all because I lost after being betrayed by Saki-chan. It's all because I lost after being betrayed by Saki-chan. It's all because I lost after being betrayed by Saki-chan. It's all because I lost after being betrayed by Saki-chan. It's all because I lost after being betrayed by Saki-chan. It's all because I lost after being betrayed by Saki-chan. It's all because I lost after being betrayed by Saki-chan. It's all because I lost after being betrayed by Saki-chan. It's all because I lost after being betrayed by Saki-chan. It's all because I lost after being betrayed by Saki-chan.]

“Eh? Was that something you needed to say ten times!?”

Well.

It probably was something he needed to say ten times.

Since on top of being betrayed, he'd straight up been killed from having his heart stabbed through.

[Ow! The scar on my chest from where Saki-chan stabbed me!]

Kumagawa moved on the sofa as if he were writhing from pain—it seemed obviously forced, even knowing that there was no such scar on his chest. Or did he mean he'd gotten a scar on his heart? Either way, it was a performance that pissed me off.

[A-at this rate, I won't feel better unless I get to grope your boobs!]

“Is there even a girl in this world that would let someone grope her boobs after a performance like that...?”

Though Kumagawa was someone who'd made betrayal a hobby, I'd been curious as to what his reaction would be after he was betrayed, and that wasn't just me being mischievous, but aha, so this was what it like... It seemed like he couldn't bear it at all.

He might even learn how to get angry.

“.....”

No, that wasn't it. That wasn't it at all.

At that time—when I'd leapt out on that rooftop, hiding my face with a mask and swinging a sword, Kumagawa had seen through my identity in one go.

He'd seen through it—but it wasn't even that.

He hadn't even been deceived for a moment.

For Kumagawa Misogi.

My mask hadn't affected him at all.

That's why, for Kumagawa, he didn't feel that he'd been betrayed by me at all—so that's why he could just appear in the Student Council office normally and talk to me normally like this.

He didn't care about having “lost” to me in the slightest.

Just from his behavior, not being affected after being betrayed by his allies made him seem almost like an open-minded guy, but it wasn't really like that. He just didn't have any sort of self-awareness.

Turning that around—turning it around for this turncoat-like guy, it could mean that Kumagawa had never trusted me from the very start.

[Hm? You suddenly turned quiet. What's the matter, Betrayer-chan? I mean, Saki-chan?]

“.....”

This guy was fucking annoying.

D'you want me to actually betray you for real this time?—well, I was gonna betray him for real eventually, but I couldn't have that be today.

In fact, today, I was actually gonna support him.

I'll serve you my support on a silver platter.

Of course, as the General Affairs Manager of the Student Council. Tch, it really pisses me off.

“Ku, Kumagawa-kun...”

Pretending to be nervous—well, part of it was me trying to act as if I felt guilty for betraying him—I turned towards Kumagawa.

“Are, are you really planning on leaving Suisou Academy? Are you really going to leave?”

[Of course I am. It was a promise I made with Anshin'in-san. You see, ever since I was born, I've only ever broken a promise 27,893 times.]

“I think it's pretty amazing that you've managed to keep count, but isn't 27,893 times more on the larger side of things?”

[Ah, is that so. Then, be large-hearted at how large that number is.]

The same light tone of voice as always.

From what he was saying, it seemed for certain that Kumagawa did plan on leaving Suisou Academy, but even so, his attitude really was the same as always.

Although, it wasn't unnatural at all.

If anything, he was just that kind of person—to drop out of school as if it were as normal as going home from school in the afternoon.

Although the real mystery was why a guy like this went along with the game by “Anshin'in-san” and tried to protect his Student Council President seat at all.

Would the answer to that mystery ever be revealed?

[Well, I figured I'd just endorse Teppou-chan as the Student Council President's successor. Saki-chan, look after her, okay?]

"Um, don't just endorse someone randomly. Teppou-chan is the least suited in this academy for a position like that, don't you think?"

[I'm not suited for it, either, though.]

"Well, that's true, but..."

Shit. I ended up agreeing with him.

Plus, he was probably more suited for it than I was.

"W-well, you don't need to rush like that, Kumagawa-kun. It's not decided yet that it's Game Over, right?"

[It *is* decided, though? This morning, Anshin'in-san loomed over me in my dreams and said so.]

"Loomed over you in your dreams..."

Phrasing, phrasing.

"Appearing in your dreams" and "looming over you in your dreams" had some pretty different nuances—it almost made her sound like some kind of ghost.

Although, maybe she was like some kind of ghost?

[‘Oh, Kumagawa-kun, you were so close. Such a shame. But, because I’m the referee, I want you to know how hard it is for me to have to pronounce your defeat. I’m sorry, and I love you,’ was what she said.]

"Even if I don't know anything about 'Anshin'in-san', I can tell that's a lie, Kumagawa-kun."

What was the antonym of credibility, again?

I wanted to use a stronger word than "lie-like".

[Yep, that's right. Actually, she seemed unreasonably happy about it. She was still speaking as modestly as always, but she was grinning from

ear to ear the whole time. That's the kind of person she is—but anyway, I'm sorry we could only be together for such a short time, Saki-chan. *Because I didn't get to settle things with you in the end*—well, it's not really a shame, but we can't do anything about the fact that Anshin'in-san ended up interfering.]

“.....”

Settle things with me, huh... Tch.

Nothing like that was gonna happen. I didn't do anything like fighting it out with people—fundamentally, anyway. At the very least, I'd like to humbly refuse fighting it out with a guy like you, Kumagawa.

[I wonder if she's just telling me, don't do any unnecessary things? Anshin'in-san sure is strict. Her gaze, and her behavior. Or maybe the circumstances changed?]

“Hey, Kumagawa-kun.”

[What is it, Betrayer-chan? I mean, Betrayer-chan?]

“You didn't correct yourself at all... Would it be all right if I asked you something for a little bit? Really, it's only a little.”

[Sure. Ask whatever you want.]

“How did you figure out my identity yesterday? That it was me, and not Kushi-cha... Yakeishi-san.”

I'd used the word “little” as a result of my usual habit, but this was something I absolutely needed to ask. It would be hard to move around if I didn't ask this—my personality was exceedingly humble, you see.

I couldn't move forward if I left things unasked.

“I was sure my disguise was perfect, though.”

[What a surprise. In your world, do you call changing your clothes and wearing a mask a 'disguise'?]

“Ah...”

I couldn't really respond to that.

But even a shallow disguise like that should've worked for Kumagawa—maybe I was underestimating him too much, but he shouldn't have been able to see through it in an instant, at least. And, if I managed to deceive him for an instant, then I should've been able to push through somehow.

"I may have, indeed, ended up betraying you, Kumagawa-kun, but..."

[You sure don't know when to quit, by saying that you 'may have'...
That's a betrayal, no matter how you look at it.]

"But at the time, when I went, I went to lose on purpose. It was supposed to be a rigged match. So that you could move on to the next stage... I was actually cooperating with you. A powerful cooperation, a push from behind. But, since you saw through me so quickly, I panicked and let go of the katana, which accidentally ended up piercing you in the chest."

[Accidentally... That was murder, you know.]

"I-it was involuntary manslaughter."

I continued to pretend that I was trembling.

It did seem like my acting was getting through to him, but...

[Well, even if you say involuntary manslaughter (*kashitsu chishi*) like it's a Cassis Spritz, it's still a pain for me. And even if you ask me how I saw through your identity, I can only say that it was for some reason or other. Like, your physique, or the atmosphere around you. No matter how much you hide your face, it's not like people can be judged based on their face alone.]

Kumagawa's words were in direct opposition to modern facial recognition systems.

This guy sure did like to bring up issues like these.

[In particular, Saki-chan, you normally hide your face behind a mask anyway, right? So that made it even easier for me to decide... Or maybe not? It's not like I really get the sense of having seen through you, so my wording might be a little vague.]

“.....”

I hadn't planned on spending so much time with him that he could recognize me based on just my physique or the atmosphere around me... Although I would've been convinced if I was told that a disguise like that wouldn't work against a childhood friend like Kushi-chan.

But someone as dull as Kumagawa, who seemed to take zero interest in others, hmm?

[Anyway, there's something I'd like to ask you as well. Saki-chan, why did you betray me? Even though we've forged such close bonds... Even though we've built such a relationship of trust.]

“I don't think we even had the first 'shi' of 'trust (*shinrai*), though...”

Although I felt like there was the first “shi” of “death (*shibou*) flag”, though...

But, as the one who betrayed him, maybe I'd better tell him why I betrayed him after all... I didn't really want to let Kumagawa know about Kushi-chan, but if he'd heard of the gist of things from “Anshin'in-san”, then there wasn't really any point in hiding it.

I didn't really see any link between keeping quiet here and protecting Kushi-chan later, either—so it was probably better to just let him know up front.

So I revealed to Kumagawa that Yakeishi Kushi was my childhood friend and that I took her place for her role as the second stage's guard in order to protect her from Kumagawa's evil clutches.

[Mhm... I see. You two must be as thick as thieves. Or as thick as cardboard.]

“Cardboard...?”

[What, you've never heard of it? The sport called 'cardboarding'. It's kind of like snowboarding, but you play in teams of two, which makes cooperation very important.] [\[?\]](#)

“...That just sounds way too surreal, even for a joke... Cardboard? Or,

maybe you're implying something? Since I wouldn't exactly say that cardboard is something that thick."

[Nah, not really. You don't need to try and read into every little thing I say, Saki-chan—but I see, a childhood friend, huh. I don't have anyone like that, you know.]

"You don't?"

[Since I've always been transferring schools. I can't even remember where I lived when I was a kid.]

Kumagawa laughed as he talked—was that something you could say while laughing?

[Even in this Suisou Academy, I only got to visit for barely one month—that really is a lot like me.]

"Visit..."

He was talking like this was just some sort of trip.

What, were schools just like hotels for him? Don't fuck with me, that's just stupid. From his point of view, someone like me who wants peace at this academy must be the height of comedy—for fuck's sake.

Even Jakago, who declared herself the ruler of Suisou Academy—of course, she was nothing more than another puppet of mine, too—but with that point of view, it was more like she was a hotel manager rather than a ruler.

Well, whether you called it a ruler or a manager, it was true that I was also throwing in my lot with the idea that, nowadays, ruling was something that was more in the service industry.

In the end, it just meant that Kumagawa wasn't suited for a role like that.

[Where should I go next?—I'd planned on playing around in this academy for a little while longer, so I haven't decided yet. Maybe I'll put out an ad. 'Recruiting schools that will accept me!' Or something like that.]

“I don’t think there’s any school on this Earth that would willingly accept you...”

[Anshin'in-san said something awful like that to me, too. But it feels like there should be at least one somewhere—]

Kumagawa spoke as if there were some meaning to it.

Well, him saying meaningless things as if they were meaningful was just the same as always, and it was true that I couldn’t spend my time reading into every little thing he said.

[Anyway, it’s a feeling that I just don’t understand. The feeling of wanting to take the place of a childhood friend to protect them—from how I see it, something like that just seems like a ‘weak point’ to me.]

“.....”

It was hard to refute.

Kushi-chan did end up being a weakness of mine, in the end—I’d even thought about stuff like having Kushi-chan be transferred to another school, but plans like those were something I hadn’t been able to execute.

Or rather, I’d just been normally excited at the idea that Kushi-chan wanted to get into Suisou Academy, too—I’d say this is the difference between reality and creative works like manga or whatever.

The thing that makes truth stranger than fiction is that, whether it’s some bad guy or wrongdoer—every villain has something they want to protect, someone they want to be kind to, and stuff like that.

Ties of obligation, you could call it.

That’s why, because they have those ties, I was able to rule over and control people like Jakago, the Student Council President before her, the teachers, and even the parents, however I liked—and since not even I’m an exception to that law, the joke was that “Anshin'in-san” was able to get to me through that. What a fucking hilarious joke.

“Well...”

Having thought that far, I stopped my train of thought—or rather, I revised it. Kumagawa Misogi—for Kumagawa Misogi, the guy right in front of me... He didn't have one of those, did he?

Really?

Something he wanted to protect... Or someone he wanted to be kind to.

Even though Kumagawa was someone who never looked after his own self, there surely was someone he wanted to protect, to be kind to—it may sound like a surprise, but there was.

There had to be.

And this isn't just what Kushi-chan's classmates had said, because it was absolutely true that he'd "saved" the students that were under Jakago's control (though I'd been the one to make her control them)—the students that were being oppressed.

However, that was just that he'd "saved" them, not that he'd "wanted to save" them—just because he was nice to people didn't mean he wanted to be nice to them.

Even if he protected something.

It didn't mean he wanted to protect it.

When Kumagawa saw through my identity in an instant when I was wearing an anime mask, it's possible to say that he protected me and Kushi-chan—but that didn't mean there was any will or intent to do so involved.

Conversely, there were those who broke or damaged things without involving any will or intent to do so, and most people would find that to be more frightening... But in my case, I think the former is scarier.

It's terrifying.

[In the first place, Yakeishi-chan isn't such a weak girl that you really needed to cover for her, right? According to Anshin'in-san, she's a holder of an annihilation-type skill, so I figured I wouldn't stand a chance against her if we fought normally.]

“An annihilation-type skill?”

Annihilation-type?

I was a bit bewildered at the unusual way it was worded.

[Yep. Plus it's the kind that's innate.]

“.....?”

Innate... So a Skill that wasn't borrowed from “Anshin'in-san”.

That was the first time I'd heard that.

I'd been with Kushi-chan the whole time since we were kids—but I was hearing that for the first time. If anything, being told that out of the blue just made me think that it was nothing but another one of Kumagawa's lies.

But no, there were of course plenty of annihilation-type skills, so I shouldn't lay down my judgment yet...

“Was that what 'Anshin'in-san' told you?”

[Yep. That's why I should be on guard, was what she was insinuating—that person sure does insinuate a lot of things, although that's what I love about her.]

“...And you never considered that that could be a lie meant to mislead you? To make you unnecessarily cautious against Kushi-chan.”

[Hey, now, unlike you, Saki-chan, Anshin'in-san isn't a liar that betrays people's hearts.]

“How annoying.”

Oops, that wasn't good.

My true thoughts, or rather, my true nature was showing.

[Or rather, you hadn't heard about it? You didn't know that your close childhood friend was hiding such a Skill, Saki-chan? Wow, how lame. It's

like, what even is friendship?]

“...Whether or not Kushi-chan even has a Skill, and whether or not she’s hiding it, the accuracy of that information seems pretty low, though... And, even if it were true, I wouldn’t consider it as her betraying me, Kumagawa-kun.”

Those were probably my true feelings.

After all, I was hiding my own Skill from Kushi-chan, too—not to mention, there were plenty of things I was hiding from her on top of that.

There were no such things as friends that didn’t keep secrets from each other. If anything, a relationship where you talked about everything and anything sounded shadier to me, or just unpleasant.

“Anyway, Kumagawa-kun. Even if Kushi-chan had such a Skill, and even if that Skill was something powerful that could knock you out in one blow, I think I still would have acted in her place in spite of it.”

[Ahaha. What a passionate friendship. Passionate to the point that I want to make the boring media these days learn from you two—and indeed, I’m not afraid of any strong people at all.]

“.....”

[If anything, I’m afraid of the weak ones—right now I’m the weakest person on this Earth, but if an even weaker person showed up, I’d have to take off my hat and prostrate myself before them.]

“I feel like prostrating yourself is a completely natural thing for you to do, though... I mean, uh, never mind. That is... Um...”

I didn’t have the time to be talking about this—whenever I talked to this guy, I always kept getting caught up in his pace. Plus I didn’t really want to talk about Kushi-chan in front of Kumagawa. Since I’d ended up hearing that information, I’d have to confirm the veracity of that annihilation-type Skill eventually, but right now, I had better things to do.

If I didn’t start moving now.

This *thing* lying around on the sofa would end up having to leave Suisou

Academy.

It was time to begin my “preparations”.

And it wasn't anything so emotional like preparing my heart—these preparations were more practical. Or rather, the biggest cause for concern regarding what I was about to do next was Kumagawa Misogi himself.

No matter what kind of person “Anshin'in-san” was, it was true that, for me, Kumagawa was much more of a threat—in terms of who I was more scared of, I would definitely have to pick Kumagawa. That was why it was meaningful to enshrine him.

“Kumagawa-kun... So, in the end, you really are planning to leave Suisou Academy?”

[Yes, I'm planning on getting all my things and leaving by today. Well, I don't really have very many things to get together, so I'm sure that'll end pretty quickly... So I'll more or less finish up the leftover Student Council work in a flash, make all the traces I've left at this school as if they “never existed” using “All Fiction”, and then it's good-bye and farewell after that.]

“.....”

As if they never existed. As if Kumagawa Misogi's school life had never existed.

[So my withdrawal should be complete by the end of today. Well, Saki-chan. Thanks to you, my life here at Suisou Academy was pretty fun. I don't know who you plan to choose as my successor—but I hope you do your best to get along with them.]

“Kumagawa-kun...”

I spoke.

And then, pointing at the window,

“Ah! There’s a girl wearing nothing but an apron dancing outside the window!”

I yelled.

「Eh!? Really!? Really!? What do you mean she’s dancing!? If she does that, the apron will flutter about and it would be a huge deal!」

“Y’tthink there’ll be a girl outside the window when we’re on the fourth floor, idiot?”

When Kumagawa sat up from the sofa with a start and fixed his eyes upon the window, I took aim for his head and threw a “plate”.

A plate.

An error message plate.

It was a large plate, like an IC card you would use when boarding a train, and to be precise, it was actually “Error Message Plate”—that was my Skill, the manifestation of my humanity that was quite easy to understand.

When I “inserted” a plate with instructions on it into the head of the target, I could control that target’s body and mind as I pleased—that was the absurd Skill I possessed. A Skill that I would refuse if someone offered it to me, but a Skill that I’d give away to someone if I could.

But anyway, the plate.

It went towards Kumagawa’s head—swishing and swooshing towards somewhere around his temple—then stabbed in, slid in, and stopped Kumagawa Misogi’s movements. And it wasn’t that he’d stopped in pain—in accordance to the instruction to “stay still”, he was just staying still.

“The Skill that rules over the rulers, ‘Error Message Plate’—normally, it wouldn’t work too well on a bastard like you, who can barely be

considered a ruler, but even though you're about to resign, you're still the Student Council President, so I should be able to stop your movements for a day or so—so just stay put like that, okay?"

I turned my back on Kumagawa, who had become as still as a statue, and left the Student Council office. Well, before I left, I made sure to close the curtains—there probably wasn't anyone that would peek into the office from outside, but this was just in case.

I locked the door to the Student Council office from outside, and I headed for the classrooms—and I'd gone down two flights of stairs when I got a text from Kushi-chan.

"Sukinasaki-senpai,

You have been contacted by Anshin'in-san.

Class 3-3 seat number 1 Kakuremino Sude

Class 3-3 seat number 2 Kakuremino Sumi

Please bring the 'Hero's Sword' and the 'Fools Katana'

when you go to visit these two.

They are also Anshin'in-san's terminals."

"Please destroy this message when you are done reading."

It seemed that, without me needing to have to do anything else, I'd been able to gain the right to participate in the game—no, considering how fast the response had been, even this must have been all according to the calculations of this "Anshin'in-san".

Seriously, how much of all this was on the palm of her hand?

However, I had something dancing on the palm of my own hand—and though it was just this academy, I'd been able to make it this far while ruling at its head.

I wasn't gonna just sit by and let myself be manipulated.

"But, the Kakuremino sisters, huh..."

It was different from the name of Stage 3's guard that Kushi-chan had told me. Did that mean that she'd prepared a completely different stage, just for me? She went out of her way to do that?

"Even so, those two are one hell of a pair—if Stage 3 was always gonna be this hard, then Kumagawa was gonna be out no matter what."

Thinking like that, I did as I was told and erased the message from Kushi-chan.

With this, I wanted to start coming up with some plans, so I'd probably only make my move after school.

"But really, I never thought I'd end up acting for Kumagawa's sake. You really never know what's gonna happen in life—it's kinda funny, but not funny at all."

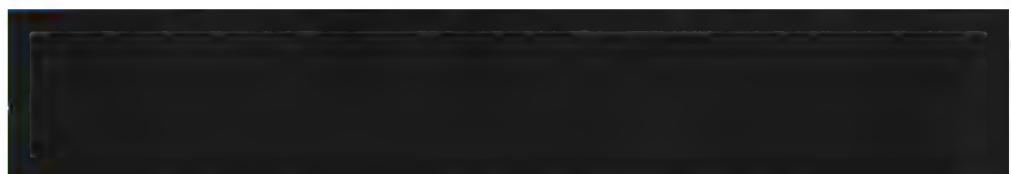
That was what I'd said out loud, but it was actually pretty hilarious. And in the end, I wasn't acting for Kumagawa-kun's sake, but for the sake of peace at Suisou Academy.

Seriously, I'm one hell of a model student.

Hiding my sneer behind my mask, I opened the door to my own class, Class 3-4.

"Good morning, everyone!"

As if nothing had happened, I gave a cheerful greeting and entered the classroom.





2

Heya, Kumagawa-kun—I didn't think we'd be able to meet for quite a while, so I'm actually surprised we were able to meet so soon.

Hm? What, you can't talk?

Ah, it seems that the effect of Sukinasaki-san's Skill applies even to the

classroom over *here*—that's pretty amazing, huh.

If anything, considering you have no desire for power, that Skill shouldn't have affected you at all, so the fact that its effect is showing up so obviously probably means that you yourself made the preparations to take the brunt of that Skill.

Even despite the fact that you're a Minus, perhaps you actually end up trusting others pretty easily—the way I see it, you ended up not being fooled by that girl's disguise because you trusted her. But really, it seems humans surprisingly do have that side to them.

When it comes to people that are suspicious of others, the flip side of that is that they have the strong desire to trust others—because they want to trust them, they want to confirm whether that person is someone that can be trusted, so they end up being constantly suspicious. It ends up being unproductive.

Well, if you can't even make any responses, then you don't need to bother trying—I can just keep talking on my own. Even if you try to make the plate's effect as if it “never happened” with “All Fiction”, it's the type of Skill where, when it takes effect once, it stays in effect semi-permanently, so there's no point in doing that—would you say that's another weak point of “All Fiction”? Or maybe you just feel awkward about making her Skill as if it never existed entirely? You really try hard at the most useless things, don't you.

Anyway, even though I said I was surprised, it wasn't like I hadn't considered the possibility in the slightest.

It's not like the impossible just occurred—if anything, what occurred was something where I thought, it sure would be interesting if this was actually possible.

Hey, don't you think so, too? Oh, right, you can't talk—like I said, you don't need to try and respond.

Either way, I think it's interesting. It's truly amusing.

After all, isn't it funny that there's somebody fighting for your sake? That there's a girl that's personally making a move in order to keep you at this school—just like that girl from way back when.

Although you never once decided to listen to what that girl had to say—but I wonder how things will turn out now. After all this is over, I'd like to hear about it. Unlike the girl from before, Sukinasaki-san was antagonistic to you from the beginning, and she might be an opponent that's strongly hostile towards you, but that's exactly why it has me so intrigued.

Well, perhaps it's not the time for that just yet?

Perhaps it's still something for the future?

For now, what you need to do first is to figure out how to get out of this situation, how to get around Sukinasaki-san. And for the record, I have zero intention of lending you a hand here—I'll be continuing the game with every intention to win.

You haven't forgotten, have you? The reason I started this game with you in the first place—one of them, Kumagawa-kun, was to chase you out of Suisou Academy, and, well, that was really more of a secondary goal, but I'll include it anyway. And the other reason was to figure out how far that defeatism of yours would go.

Even after becoming a hero, would you still be able to lose?

Since you actually dropped out at Stage 2—since you dropped out at a point far below my expectations, your expulsion from Suisou Academy is more or less already decided. But if Sukinasaki-san, the one who defeated you, is able to complete the remaining quests and splendidly clear Stage 3 and Stage 4, then Kumagawa-kun, even if you lost midway through the game, I'll allow you the grotesque (*igyō*) achievement (*igyō*) of having cleared the game in its entirety.

Even though there's no loser-revival round, and no overtime, it's really magnificent.

It really makes me laugh.

And so, for the time being, I won't do anything like mobilize the 80 terminals at this academy to chase you out—I'll just keep an eye on how things develop. Good for you.

Well, when it comes to the guards for Stage 3, the Kakuremino sisters,

it's possible that that girl will be able to clear it properly, unlike you, but I wonder how the final stage will go? Why don't we watch over her together, Kumagawa-kun?

However, if you end up eventually being able to talk, then there's something that I would absolutely like for you to tell me. That is, what exactly is that girl to you?

In Stage 2, when she, wielding the "Fool's Katana", challenged you, wielding the "Hero's Sword"—you saw through her true identity and ended up losing just like that, but at that time, couldn't you have actually had a "good battle" against her?

Of course, I'm not saying that she's someone you want to protect, or that she's someone you fell in love with... It's just that, whenever there's something about you I don't understand, I just want to try and figure it out.

But putting that aside.

Well, as we're about to begin spectating this game, shall I introduce the Kakuremino sisters? Allow me to introduce those two, who I've chosen as the new guards for this stage.

Class 3-3 seat number 1, Kakuremino Sude, and Class 3-3 seat number 2, Kakuremino Sumi.

These two terminals of mine are in the Chess Club, you see—

■ ■

It was called bughouse chess.

A variant of chess with unusual rules, where you played with two chessboards side by side—that was what I was gonna play with the Kakuremino sisters on that day, after school.

In other words, bughouse chess was the Stage 3 quest in this game by "Anshin'in-san"—not to mention, I was gonna have to take on both sisters at the same time on my own, so the rules had changed even further from normal bughouse chess.

It was normally a game you played with four people, but I was gonna play it two-on-one.

The rules were a lot simpler compared to shogi, and if I had to say it then chess was much easier to approach, but if there was one big difference between shogi and chess, it would be whether or not you could use the pieces you captured on your own side.

Since Japan was totally used to the shogi rules, something like that may not feel unusual at all, but on a global scale, the world wasn't really used to the idea of being able to use pieces you capture on your own side, so in the sense of popularity, it was like shogi fell one step behind chess—however, when it came to bughouse chess, that rule had actually been adopted.

This is yet another difference between shogi and chess, but the pieces in chess are divided into black and white—to make it easy to understand, there's a black team and a white team, and the color of the piece determines the team it's on.

Of course, since the colors of the pieces are different, it obviously doesn't make sense to capture an enemy piece and use it on your side, but bughouse chess happens to be a revolutionary chess variant that resolves that problem.

First off, to explain the rules of normal bughouse chess, there are two chessboards as I mentioned earlier. Team A and Team B each have a set of black pieces and a set of white pieces, and they face off using both boards at once.

It's a one-on-one times two, basically.

On one of the boards, Team A's Player A1 uses their white pieces and faces off against Team B's Player B1 using their black pieces, and on the other board, Team A's Player A2 uses their black pieces to face off against Team B's Player B2 using their white pieces.

And this is the crux of the rules—when a player captures an enemy piece on one board, that player's ally can then use that piece on the other board.

Of course, because the color of the piece ends up being the same.

Making that rule possible even in chess.

When Player A1 captures a piece on Board 1, Player A2 can use it on Board 2; when Player B2 captures a piece on Board 2, Player B1 can use it on Board 1. It sounds pretty convoluted, and it actually is pretty convoluted, but anyway, it's a game that prioritizes team play. So the fact that I had to play a game like that on my own, versus a team made up of twins... It just seemed fucking hard.

Well, I didn't know if their team play was really that good, just because they were twins... Maybe that's just something that happens in manga. But the fact that the Kakuremino sisters were experts at chess was something the whole school knew.

That Renpei chick, who was the Vice President under the former administration, the Jakago Student Council—since she played chess as a hobby, she'd often call up the Kakuremino sisters to play against her—and even though it was just for fun, Renpei was the one that ended up learning a buncha stuff.

Well, if there's one small salvation, it's that I'm not necessarily all that bad at these kinds of strategy games myself—I didn't often play with others because I didn't want to show the cards in my hand, but on this chessboard called Suisou Academy, the two years I spent moving around these human pieces weren't just for show.

Plus, while the rules were pretty unique, the concept of bughouse chess itself was something I happened to already know about... So I'd been pretending to freak out while the Kakuremino sisters proudly explained the rules to me, but I'd managed to work out a strategy in the meantime.

The victory conditions were to place a king in checkmate on either board—or for either of the Kakuremino sisters to surrender. Well, under the following rules, I doubted the sisters would voluntarily surrender no matter what state the board was in, but the conditions for my defeat were mostly the same, to be placed in checkmate on either board or to surrender—but on top of that, I was also given a time limit.

When it became time for school to close for the day (that is, when it

became 6 p.m.), the game would be over—it would be forced to end with my loss.

Of course, the most frightening thing about this rule was that the opponents could intentionally slow down their moves—rather, if they actually would do that for me, I would actually want that to happen, since it would become easier for me to understand—but, as experts of chess, it seemed that the Kakuremino sisters weren't gonna swallow their pride when it came to making moves.

As if we were actually playing a game of blitz chess, both the older and younger sisters came at me already knowing the best moves to make and making them with the fastest speeds—so it took all my ability to handle them.

It took all my ability—or at least, that was the performance I put on as I continued this two-board game. As for why I put on such a sluggish performance, well, I wanted to make it so that the Kakuremino sisters got conceited, even if I had to ask them to do so.

It wasn't like I was playing chess against a machine that would never make a mistake, so I was gonna employ as much psychological warfare as I could—Kumagawa was better than me at stuff like this, but as the General Affairs Manager of the Student Council, let's just say I absorbed some of his charms.

"...But I really don't get it at all," said the older of the Kakuremino sisters. "Why would Anshin'in-san even accept a substitute—I can't help but think that this is totally just a throwaway match, though. Don't you think that, too, Sumi-chan?"

"Yeah, Sude-chan—but, well, it's Anshin'in-san we're talking about, so maybe she just didn't think too much about it."

That was the younger sister's response.

So she just didn't think about things sometimes?—she really is just halfhearted about things, this "Anshin'in-san". Well, I'm sure that wasn't *all* she was...

"You know, about castling," continued the younger sister, even as she made her moves on the chessboard—since I couldn't keep up with their

fast pace in making my moves, I took my time thinking over each move before making them, all while keeping the time limit in mind, so my opponents had a lot of free time to chat. “It’s a distinctive special rule in chess that allows you to exchange the positions of the king and the rook... But maybe we can just say that that happened for Kumagawa and Sukinasaki right now.”

“Then, is Sukinasaki the rook? I dunno about that.”

The older sister was saying things that were openly looking down on me. Things were headed in a good direction.

“Hey, Sukinasaki? You’re just being forced to do this by Kumagawa, right? This is just that loser bastard struggling in vain out of desperation, right? I do feel a little sorry for him, but I can’t really hold back, here—”

“Ahaha...”

I forced a smile.

Though I was the one that led them to think that way, it actually made me feel a little uneasy if they fell for it that much.

Of course, that was just me being modest. In my heart I was just thinking, “So far, so good.”

At the very least, it seemed that the older of the two was lowering her guard.

Even if they were twins, they were still different in terms of being older and younger. And the younger sister, Sumi, still seemed to look at me with a cautious gaze.

Well, my actions right now didn’t really match up with the character I showed my classmates normally—though I was doing my best to gloss over that unnaturalness. I did come up with a good enough reason for why I was doing something that didn’t seem like something I would do, but it was still pretty tough.

If I wanted to describe it with a chess term like castling, I guess I’d say my situation right now would be called a zugzwang. Even though I knew I was at a disadvantage, I was still forced to make a move—although

normally, my *modus operandi* was to corner my enemies, and everybody, in those types of situations.

“Well, rest assured, Sukinasaki—” said the older sister, Sude. “—We’ll let you put up a good fight so that you can make excuses to Kumagawa later. If we don’t, we wouldn’t even be able to imagine what kind of things he’ll put you through.”

“I-I’m really grateful... A-and that’s good for both of us, right?” I said.

Though I was speaking with a weak attitude, it still had some provocative implications involved.

“You’re taking me into your consideration, plus you two can resolve things without having to meet Kumagawa-kun directly...”

It was the younger sister Sumi’s turn to move—and though she’d been making her moves at a fixed speed, almost like a machine, up until now, her hand stopped for the first time.

And then she spoke.

“Even if we had had to meet with Kumagawa directly... I have the confidence that I, that we, wouldn’t have lost. Don’t look down on us, Sukinasaki.”

“S-sorry.”

I apologized immediately. Since it didn’t cost me anything to apologize.

But whether or not you had confidence to win against Kumagawa, that confidence meant nothing.

Because anyone could win against him.

“But, but you two, and everybody, you guys all show a lot of hostility towards Kumagawa-kun—but why is that?”

Teppou had been pretty belligerent from the start, and I didn’t really get it from just seeing her, but after hearing what Utsubogi and Kushi-chan had to say, I couldn’t help but connect the dots.

“You don’t know?” said Sumi, making her next move as if she’d been

satisfied by my fake apology. “It’s because that idiot used his Skill to seal away Anshin’in-san. To us, Anshin’in-san is basically the very same person as ourselves, so it’s natural that we’d hate him and resent him and show hostility.”

“That... I did hear that before. But Kumagawa-kun’s ‘All Fiction’ doesn’t seem like a Skill made for sealing people away... In terms of being able to seal someone’s power, then Former President Jakago’s ‘Aero Biker’ seems more suited...”

“What, you haven’t even heard something like that?” the older sister Sude finally interrupted, with a tone that was a bit condescending towards me—although that way of thinking made it extremely convenient for me.

Sure enough, Sude was going to proudly chatter on about this stuff for me—meanwhile, with the two boards in front of me, I continued to make moves while pretending to worry about what moves to make, even after I’d already decided on them.

“The Skill Kumagawa owned originally was ‘Book Maker’, and ‘All Fiction’ was something else, Sukinasaki. As for what kind of Skill it was specifically, it was a breach of etiquette to ask, and Anshin’in-san never told us in the end, but it’s most likely some kind of sealing Skill. Basically, Kumagawa used that ‘Book Maker’ to seal Anshin’in-san away—and Anshin’in-san is meddling with Kumagawa in order to escape that seal.”

“Mm-hmm...”

I nodded along, but I decided to ignore Sude’s final inference. From what I’d learned of “Anshin’in-san” up until now, she didn’t seem like the type that would do something so direct like meddling with Kumagawa in order to break a seal. If anything, I could more strongly imagine her actually enjoying being sealed.

“Sude-chan, you’re talking too much... That’s also a breach of etiquette,” scolded the younger sister, Sumi, from beside her.

As expected, the younger sister was much more cautious—and that showed even in her chess moves. If the two of them happened to play against each other, which one of them would win? That was what I’d suddenly started to think about—but, well, a game like chess isn’t the

kind where one is absolutely stronger or weaker than another.

There are times when assertiveness becomes a plus, and there are times when cautiousness becomes a plus.

When I looked at the clock, it was already 5:30 p.m.

Only 30 more minutes left until the time limit of school closing—in just 30 minutes, I needed to checkmate the king of either the older or the younger sister, but at this rate I'd have to confront the fact that either option would be considerably difficult.

And that was a matter of course.

On both boards, I'd moved more for the sake of defense than attack—like in shogi, there was the rule of being able to use the pieces you take, so I was able to stick it out as long as I stuck to defense. Although this could seem pretty meaningless thanks to the rule of losing if I ran out of time... But actually, it wasn't like that at all.

Or rather, I didn't expect that I'd be able to win against these sisters in the first place... As soon as I heard the rules, all I'd been thinking about was finding a loophole.

While pretending that it was just a difficult fight—or perhaps, while pretending that I was just being forced into this by Kumagawa, I was simply observing the two sisters to see which one of them was *easier to manipulate*.

The bold and arrogant older sister?

The cautious and meticulous younger sister?

Which one of them—would be easier to insert “Error Message Plate” into.

With the rule being “you lose if you surrender”, if I manipulated the body and mind of one of them with “Error Message Plate” to force them to concede defeat, then it would become my win—it would be rather short

and disappointing, but I'd be able to quickly bring this game to an end. However, the problem here was the timing with which to carry out that plan.

"Error Message Plate" was a skill where, if they dodged it, then that was the end of it—if the opponent was just your average student with no Skill, then I didn't need to worry that much, since if the first one missed I could just throw a second one. But my opponents right now were terminals of "Anshin'in-san".

It wasn't clear whether or not they had Skills—if I pulled out this metagaming strategy at them, and if they managed to dodge it, then I had no idea how they were gonna react.

So I was gonna concentrate on just one of them.

I was gonna aim for just one of the two—so in the 30 minutes I had left, I needed to find an opportunity to "insert" my plate. And, so that I didn't seem suspicious, I needed to keep playing bughouse chess without it seeming unnatural.

"About this... Um, were there any rules about putting two pawns in the same column, or placing a pawn to put the king in check? I, uh, was nervous and forgot to check..."

I was asking this question to make it obvious that I was an amateur, encouraging my opponents to lower their guard—well, even though I said that, the only one lowering her guard was the older sister, while the younger sister seemed to grow even warier.

"You know, in chess... Well, it's like this for shogi, too, but," began the younger sister, ignoring my question. In fact, she wasn't even talking to me, but her sister—it seemed that she was concerned about her older sister to the same extent that she was concerned about her opponent, me. "It's a lot like fighting an imaginary war, don't you think, Sude-chan?"

"An imaginary war?"

The two sisters began a conversation that completely left me out—normally, it would be a pretty irritating metagaming strategy on its own, but it was actually quite convenient for me in this case.

The time limit was drawing closer and closer, so if I didn't use this chance, another one probably wouldn't show up.

The one I was aiming for—was the older sister, Sude.

I would throw a plate at Sude's forehead.

...Failure was unacceptable—of course, it was a problem of sorts that I didn't have the kind of strict personality to say something like that. I was really just the kind that thought, "Even if I fail, that's just how things go," and calmly think over the situation. Although, because of that, I would start thinking that I didn't care what happened to Kumagawa... Well, you could spin it optimistically by saying that I could execute my plan without being nervous.

As for the timing... Right now, it was my turn on board 1, so I would make a move there, and then finish my turn on board 2 as well, and when the older sister at board 2 got swept along by the rhythm of the game and was about to make her move—

I would stick it into her.

I would make my move.

Of course, I wouldn't move any chess pieces—I would stick the plate into her.

"What do you mean by an imaginary war, Sumi-chan?"

"You're mobilizing various kinds of soldiers, and you're trying to capture the opponent's King—that's exactly what a war is, right? Of course, actual war isn't as simple as this... People like to call chess and shogi intellectual and elegant and sophisticated games, but really, they're more like barbaric fights—"

"Haha, I was wondering what you were talking about, but it was just the same opinion as always, Sumi-chan—in the first place, if you're going to bring that up, then what we're doing right now isn't fighting an imaginary

war but an actual war by proxy. Normally, it would be a war that Anshin'in-san and Kumagawa Misogi could just fight directly, but it's being fought by us and Sukinasaki... It's pretty weird, huh. It's not like us winning against Sukinasaki would mean that Anshin'in-san won against Kumagawa, and on the off chance that Sukinasaki managed to win against us, it wouldn't be like Kumagawa won against Anshin'in-san..."

"So is it like saying that there are no winners in war?"

They were having a completely meaningless conversation.

Well, in that respect, even if they were terminals of "Anshin'in-san", their senses and sensibilities were basically just those of high schoolers—considering I was also an active high schooler, they probably weren't that much different from me.

They just wanted to feel all-powerful and almighty by talking about exaggerated topics like war as if they knew about it—in short, they had a lust for power.

It was a conversation I could rest easy at.

If they had a strong lust for power, then my Skill—the plates—would properly get stuck onto these two. But, to say what I really, really thought, or rather what I've said a ton of times already, I didn't really like my own Skill.

It was just something I used, that I made use of, because I had it.

Because, every time I used this Skill—I would end up feeling my own shamefulness. It made me realize how strong my own lust for power was, how much I myself desired to be all-powerful and almighty.

The peace of the academy.

That was all I desired.

But, the reason I desired that so strongly—the reason I aspired towards it, to the point of sacrificing everything or having it all be wasted—I couldn't come up with a good answer.

And when I couldn't, then I would just arrive at a terrible, unpleasant

answer—that is, I was only performing the act of preserving the peace of the academy to simply feel all-powerful and almighty.

My ideology was lacking.

It felt like there had to be tens of thousands of people that thought the same, but I also felt like I was the only one in the world that thought like that—what did “Anshin'in-san” think? For example, would she be able to clearly declare her reasons for the various ways she meddled with Kumagawa?

But in any case, war was not something a simple student could speak of.

If they did speak of it—it would only be in terms of a game.

“—Well, if this is war, then having the king and the queen take part like this seems pretty old-fashioned... That doesn't happen in modern wars, after all.”

“That's true, Sumi-chan. Modern wars are a lot more blunt... Or they're just like power struggles with a lot of indirect mudslinging—”

“Hey,” I said.

I pushed my way into the sisters' conversation a bit forcibly. It was not because I wanted to offer my own opinion on their discussion of war over the game boards, but because I was putting into action my plans to bring an end to Stage 3.

Of course, there was already a plate in my hand.

“I'm a complete amateur at chess, and there's something I'd like for you two to teach me about, so could you two teach me a little? Really, it's only a little...”

“Huh? What? Sukinasaki.”

It seemed she found it rather disagreeable to have her chat with her younger sister interrupted, as Sude faced me with a frown.

“Actually, you'd better make a move quick or time's gonna run out. Really, people who aren't used to chess are always like this—they have no

sense of time.”

Maybe we should have prepared some chess clocks, too, said Sude—and, as if taking her words to heart, I moved a piece.

Bishop to square something something.

“So, what is it? I’ll answer if it’s something I can answer.”

“Why is it that, in chess pieces, the queen moves more freely than the king?”

It didn’t really matter what the question was... But this was a question that anyone new to chess, if not me, would get confused about. So I’m sure that made me sound even more innocent.

“The king in chess is like the king in shogi, and can only move one space at a time in any direction... But the queen is like a combination of a rook and a bishop, and it can go in any direction as far as you want. Isn’t that a little weird?”

“Isn’t it fine? There’s no reason why the queen shouldn’t be able to move better than the king, right? Maybe it’s because chess was created in a culture where ‘ladies first’ was the norm.”

“Right, and I don’t see anything wrong with that, but in that case, shouldn’t they have made the rules so that you win if you can capture the other player’s queen? Because the queen is so much stronger than the king.”

“You’re thinking of something pretty stupid, aren’t you.”

Kakuremino Sude laughed, as if she felt astounded from the bottom of her heart.

This was a good direction for the conversation to take, but at that moment, the younger sister, Sumi, seemed to hide her presence for some reason—perhaps I’d really ruined her mood by that much by interrupting that conversation between the two sisters, but on the other hand.

“Isn’t it like that, then? In shogi, would you rather have it so that you win if you can capture the promoted rook instead of the king?”

“Ah...”

There was a *senryu* that went, “the greenhorn at shogi prefers the rook to the king”—so it was something like that. But, the comparison between the king and the promoted rook in shogi, and the comparison between the king and the queen in chess... It felt a bit different.

“But a queen... Is just a female monarch, right?”

As I spoke, I picked up one of my pieces on the other board—and quite fittingly, it was the queen piece.

“? Why are you trying to make sure of something like that? It’s obvious that a queen is a female monarch.”

“And the king is a male monarch. Right?”

“Of course. That’s something even a grade schooler would know.”

“Then it really is weird.”

I moved—moved the queen on my side, in order to take Kakuremino Sude’s queen. Though I’d taken a powerful piece from my opponent by capturing the queen, it ended up leaving my king practically defenseless, making it one of the worst of the worst possible moves—*and if I moved at this timing, the effect should be tremendous.*

“Why?”

I spoke—making my voice as threatening as I could.

“Why is it that, in the same era, in the same location—there are two monarchs, the king and the queen?”

“Eh?”

For a moment, there was an opening. As I’d hit upon a blind spot in her knowledge—and perhaps she was feeling ashamed, as well. A feeling of

embarrassment for not having considered something so basic, despite being known as a chess expert—well, it didn't matter.

With the hand I was using to hold the opponent's queen.

And the plate that was hidden in that hand—using the opening I created, I aimed at Kakuremino Sude's forehead, in order to insert that plate.

Unlike Kumagawa, Kakuremino Sude did have a strong lust for power, so I should be able to completely control her in not just her body but her mind, as well—with over 15 minutes left until the time limit, if I forced her to surrender on her turn, then it would be quest clear for me!

But that was, of course.

If I was able to insert a plate into Kakuremino Sude.

But, to block the plate that I'd thrown—a chess piece had been thrown right in front of Kakuremino Sude's eyes.

My plate had been guarded by that chess piece—a king.

“!? What the hell are you doing, Sukinasaki!”

The one who had managed that defense was not Kakuremino Sude herself, who shouted in surprise.

It was Kakuremino Sumi, who sat beside her—by slipping in the king piece in between me and Kakuremino Sude, she had managed to protect her older sister.

Having cautiously observed me this whole time, it seemed she'd managed to completely see through the timing with which I would act, and defended against my plate—by knocking it out of the way.

The plate that had been struck by the king flew upwards and stabbed into the ceiling—it stabbed in quite deeply, and so didn't fall back down as a result.

“Wha, what's this—a Skill? Sukinasaki, you were a Skill Holder!? No way

—there's no way, you're just a—"

Just a normal high schooler, the kind of minor role that just got caught up in things, was what she was probably about to say—but even if she got easily carried away by things, Kakuremino Sude was by no means an idiot. Recalling how I was—how Sukinasaki Saki was—under the former Jakago administration, she surely was able to remember a few things, because her expression slowly morphed into a clear sign of "realization".

But that conversely meant that this chick hadn't known I was a Skill Holder until this very moment—which meant that "Anshin'in-san", who was supposed to be omniscient and omnipotent, had not told her about it.

Not to the older sister—at least.

But this wasn't anything like a breach of etiquette or whatever. Seeing as she'd managed to protect her older sister from my attack so precisely, I should probably take this to mean that the younger sister had in fact known about my Skill from the beginning—in other words, there had been a difference in the information that "Anshin'in-san" imparted onto her terminals.

In short, this was still all according to her calculations.

By choosing not to impart that information to the older sister, who easily got conceited, she created a huge opening—and made me aim for that opening. And then she had the cautious younger sister guard against it, in order to end Stage 3 with me losing because of foul play.

That was probably how she'd outlined it.

If she had also imparted that information to the older sister, then I would've seen that they were both on guard with no openings, and would obviously have taken a different approach.

An easy-to-find solution—she prepared a dummy solution that was almost like an example solution and then guided me towards it... It was pretty much the basics of the basics as an arrogant strategy to manipulate others—

"But really, is she an idiot?"

I didn't fucking care if she was omniscient or omnipotent or an equalist or what.

But I wasn't gonna be manipulated a second time.

"Eh... Eeh? Huh... Sumi-chan?"

After finally regaining her senses after being shaken up—perhaps in order to perform some counterattack as a two-man cell, Kakuremino Sude had looked at her younger sister beside her.

And she finally realized that the younger sister that had protected her was sitting completely still, as if she'd been struck by lightning.

"Sorry about that—well, I'm not really sorry at all. My 'Error Message Plate' doesn't actually need to be put into people's heads, y'see."

It was just as effective no matter where it was inserted on the target's body.

Casually, without really feeling any sort of danger, I moved to peek under the table with the chessboards in order to confirm just in case.

On the opposite side of the right hand, which had aimed for the older sister's forehead—the left hand had thrown a plate underneath the table and inserted it into Kakuremino Sumi's *thighs*, which I went to confirm just in case.

"Well, this is supposed to be top secret, though. There are only two people that know about my Skill, but there isn't even one that knows about this secret trick of mine."

"Not, not even one..."

Seeing her younger sister being completely "ruled over", the older sister trembled—it seemed that she'd read into those words too much on her own.

“Wa... Wait, I surrender, I surrender! I lost, I lost, I lost! So please don’t kill Sumi-chan—I don’t care what happens to me—!”

“Oh, what, so you’re the one who surrendered in the end?”

Saying that, I threw yet another plate—and this time, it was a direct hit upon the forehead of Kakuremino Sude, who’d been completely shaken up. Well, if she didn’t care what happened to her, then I was gonna do whatever I wanted, just as she’d said.

And so, the older sister froze, just as her younger sister had.

Both her body, and her mind.

They froze.

“Shit... I’m the one who ‘rules over the rulers’ for the sake of peace at this academy—y’think I’ll go around killing one of this academy’s precious students? Obviously I meant that I would just use my Skill to wipe your memories.”

Of course, even if I wiped the memories of these two, I probably wouldn’t be able to get as far as wiping the memories of “Anshin’in-san”, who was at the root, so this meant that my secret trick had gotten leaked to “Anshin’in-san”—even if she couldn’t investigate by listening to her terminals, there should be enough evidence for her to suss it out anyway. Tch, I wouldn’t be surprised if even up until now was all according to her plans.

Even me saying that I wasn’t gonna be manipulated a second time, could be all according to her plans.

Well, if “Anshin’in-san” really is omniscient and omnipotent, then no matter how hard I try to hide or disguise my Skill, she should be able to see through it all regardless... And it was possible that I’d been cornered into using my “top secret” technique because she already knew about it... But even so, it didn’t matter. In any case, there were still ten minutes until school closed for the day—in any case, I’d managed to clear Stage 3.

Only the final stage was left.

“All right, then, question for you two—who do I gotta go and meet next?”

Who's the guard for the final stage? What class, what seat number, what's her name?"

"Duh guard fuh duh final stayjuh is," the two sisters said at the same time.

The weak point of controlling people with "Error Message Plate" was that it messed up the way they talked like that—if only I could overcome something like this, I'd be able to use this Skill much more freely.

Well, it wasn't like it was in some sort of code, so if I just paid attention, it wasn't too hard to figure out what they were saying.

I listened carefully to the words they spoke.

"Duh guard fuh duh final stayjuh is—Class 1-3 seat numbuh 31, Yakeishi Kushi."

"Wha—?"

Hearing that, I jumped up out of my seat in reflex.

■ ■

Slash! Slash!

Those sound effects resounded from my back, forcing me to realize in an instant that something had happened to my body.

Whether it was transmitted through my bones or through my flesh, somehow that sound, accompanied with searing pain, was transmitted to my senses, making me collapse onto the floor of the classroom.

As if taking down the desk, the two chessboards, and the Kakuremino sisters all down with me, I crumpled over and fell to the floor.

"Ack..."

I promptly tried to do a forward somersault in order to stand back up, but I wasn't able to pull off something so gymnast-like, and instead just normally failed and hit my head.

Fuck, it hurt.

My physical abilities weren't all that good in the first place. If anything, I was on the weaker side of things. Of course, even if that weren't the case, my back had just been sliced open, and it's not like there was anyone in the world that could show their best performance after something like that.

In a fighting game, no matter how low your health went, you could still fight at the same power as someone at full health—and depending on the game, if your health dropped below 10 percent, you could even get a power up—but of course, reality wasn't like that.

In reality, even with just a slight cut on your fingertip, it made it harder for you to write with a pen, and on top of that, even with just a single mouth ulcer, it would constantly take up all your focus as you made it through your day. With just a single headache, even Kumagawa was reduced to such a poor condition.

So the moment my back was sliced open, you could say the game was already over.

But even in that condition, I managed to turn around and see who'd been the one to cut me down.

“Sorry, Sukinasaki-senpai—but, this is all for your sake, too.”

Was what she said.

Class 1-3 seat number 31, Yakeishi Kushi.

She hadn't even changed into her *iaido* uniform, and was still in her school uniform.

If you're gonna apologize for it, then just don't cut me down at all, was what I wanted to say... But, as if it was completely natural for her, she was dual-wielding the "Hero's Sword" in her right hand with the "Fool's Katana" in her left.

A blend of Western and Japanese, huh—just as I'd imagined, it looked pretty magnificent.

Speaking of which, when I was about to participate in Stage 3, the second item in that message had told me to make sure to bring those two... But they were (obviously) never used when playing bughouse chess, so I'd just left them in the corner of the classroom.

Shit. So I just brought them so that I could be cut down by them?

If it was gonna be like that, I should've just dumped them in a locker like Kumagawa—if I did that, then from the sound of the locker opening and closing, I would've been able to realize that I was gonna be attacked from behind.

Of course, even with that in mind, I couldn't deny that I'd been completely "fucked over"—I never thought that she'd aim for the moment just when I cleared Stage 3.

No, the moment that Kushi-chan had aimed for wasn't the moment I cleared the quest—it was afterwards. She'd aimed specifically for the moment when I heard Kushi-chan's name and jumped out of my seat.

And the scabbard for the "Fool's Katana" was on the floor—but that surely didn't mean that she had any intention of losing.

"...Um, it hurts."

Even so, I pretended to be calm—and even as I felt the amount of blood pouring from my back, I turned to face Kushi-chan. Y'know, it kinda felt like a funny exchange that would happen where someone was hit by a car and was asked, "Are you all right?", and they replied, "Yeah, I'm all right."

"Wha, what's the meaning of this, Kushi-chan... Why would you do something like this? Thi, this was all for Kushi-chan's sake—"

However, in my case, even though my voice was trembling, I didn't really feel all that much pain—even that frightened expression of mine was just me hamming it up.

Even if the game was practically over with how low my health got... I wasn't about to throw the match here.

“For my sake? That's not it at all, isn't it, Sukinasaki-senpai? Right now, aren't you moving for Kumagawa's sake?”

She shakily brandished the sword and the katana in her hands as she spoke—even her footsteps seemed unsteady as she approached.

But still, there appeared to be a sense of unity in those movements, as if she were dancing some sort of dance.

The Sword Dancer—Yakeishi Kushi.

“But, it's fine, because I will fight for your sake, Sukinasaki-senpai. I'll make you realize that you're just being used by Kumagawa!”

Kushi-chan had a smile on her face.

Yikes... So Kushi-chan had a personality like this?

Though I'd known her for so long, I didn't realize at all.

Although, it didn't mean that this was Kushi-chan's true nature or anything—this was just another facet of her.

Humans had many different facets to them.

Like how the personality that I usually pretended to have most likely wasn't a total lie, but just another facet of mine.

This was also one—for her.

“That reminds me... Kushi-chan, you were a Skill Holder, huh... Honestly, there's probably no point in asking you in this situation, but do you think you can tell me about it?”

“Eh? Who did you hear that from? Did that Kumagawa bastard tell you? Well, I guess I have no choice... Looks like I'm going to have to deal with

him later. Well, whatever, since I planned on doing that anyway.”

After saying that, Kushi-chan continued.

“Ah, don’t worry,” she said. “Of course, I’m not going to kill you or anything, Sukinasaki-senpai—I’ve kept it a secret all this time, but I really should have told you about it before all this. It really pained me to keep it a secret, so I’m glad I got this chance. In the first place, it’s not the kind of Skill I should be keeping secret, either.”

“.....”

“The Skill’s name is ‘Dancing Danger’^[?]—well, that’s why it’s ironic that people call me ‘Sword Dancer’. To make it easy to understand, it’s a Skill that ‘lets me be chosen by swords’.”

It wasn’t easy to understand at all.

That was what I’d thought, but when I compared it with the knowledge I’d gained previously, the Skill was maybe surprisingly easy to understand—during Stage 1, when looking for the “Hero’s Sword”, Kumagawa had certainly said something like that.

He’d said, only the chosen one could pull out the “Hero’s Sword”.

Through “All Fiction”, Kumagawa had made the system itself as if it never existed in a rather illogical manner, but that sword that had been stuck into the bottom of the pool was originally supposed to be like Excalibur from the Arthurian legends—something that only the “chosen hero” would be able to pull out.

And I could conjecture that the “Fool’s Katana”, which was surely upwards compatible with the “Hero’s Sword”, most likely had a similar rule in place.

In other words, for those two items that chose their wielders—it probably meant that you needed the qualifications in order to use them to their fullest.

In reality, when Kumagawa was simply trying to test the cutting ability of the “Hero’s Sword”, his hand slipped and he’d stabbed his own heart—and when I had tried to use the “Fool’s Katana” in Kushi-chan’s place, my own hands had slipped, and (though he’d revived right afterwards) I had murdered Kumagawa.

I’d passed off the former as just Kumagawa and his Kumagawa-like clumsiness, and interpreted the latter as me just slipping up—but in other words, didn’t we just fail to use those blades because we didn’t have the qualifications to wield them?

The sword and the katana.

They had rejected the idea of being used by us—or something.

And, right now, Kushi-chan was using both of them to their fullest—so that was the annihilation-type Skill, “Dancing Danger”...

“Saying something like, I’m not suited for this job—so in the end, you were just being modest, huh... And you were just making it seem like you were hesitating... Seems like I meddled for no reason.”

“No, my specialty is just to handle famous katanas and swords, and I’m not good at fighting at all... So I really am not suited for this.”

I wonder about that.

Well, it was true that being good at fighting and enjoying fighting were different things that seemed falsely similar.

“Well, even so, why are you just a manager, then...? You could’ve easily performed as an athlete in the *Kendo* Club or the *Iaido* Club. Since a formal match isn’t a fight at all, right?”

“In the *Kendo* Club or the *Iaido* Club, there aren’t exactly any famous katanas that choose the ones who wield them... If I have to use a bamboo sword, then I just end up becoming unreasonably weak. That’s why a Skill like this is normally pretty unusable. If it weren’t for Anshin’in-san telling me about it, I probably would never have even realized that I had this Skill.”

With both blades in hand, Kushi-chan shrugged her shoulders.

She probably wasn't being modest when it came to this—perhaps if we were still in the Sengoku period, but in the current era where katanas and swords were practically just works of art, they were just way too unusable.

Well, annihilation-type Skills were basically all like that—they were way too dangerous and way too unusable.

“But I'm glad that a Skill like this could be of use to you, Sukinasaki-senpai.”

“.....”

The Skill could be of use to me.

Those words sounded completely pointless, but I still went “aha!”, having ended up realizing something—as for what I realized, it had to do with the Stage 1 task.

To pull out the “Hero's Sword” that was stuck in the bottom of the pool—Kumagawa had spent all his time up until the time limit and had made good use of his “All Fiction” in order to clear the quest, but even if he hadn't.

If he had simply asked Kushi-chan, then it was a task that he could've cleared in five minutes. She'd even said that, even though she wasn't as good as Usubogi, she was still pretty good at swimming...

When faced with Stage 1's quest of looking for a sword, then I'd naturally thought that you should start by looking in the *Kendo* Club or the *Iaido* Club, but Kumagawa had taken a shortcut straight to the pool—at the time, I'd thought that I'd seen one side of how frightening Kumagawa could really be, but that sloppy shortcut had unexpectedly ended up failing to raise the flag for the clear condition.

If we had gone to the *Kendo* Club or the *Iaido* Club, we would immediately have gotten in touch with Kushi-chan (though at the time she wouldn't have been a guard or anything)—in the end, now that we were opening this can of worms... Or rather, now that we were closing up this can of worms, it was like Kumagawa had been losing ever since the start

of Stage 1.

“Do you think you can let me know... Kushi-chan. What exactly are the rules for Stage 4?”

“It’s the same as Stage 2. To win against the guard of Stage 4, which is me... If there are any differences, it would be the fact that I’m also wielding the ‘Hero’s Sword’ now. The world may be vast, but even so, I’m most likely the only person who can wield these two swords that Anshin’in-san refined at the same time.”

“.....”

Even if there was no loser-revival round on the players’ side, I guess one was allowed for the guards, huh—it kinda felt like a violation of the rules, although, technically I was the one that acted as her substitute in Stage 2, so it wasn’t exactly a loser-revival round at all.

“Either way, it doesn’t change the fact that I meddled for no reason. I didn’t need to act in your place in Stage 2 at all... Since you would be using the ‘Fool’s Katana’, and not a bamboo sword, so Kumagawa-kun wouldn’t have been a problem for you in the slightest. Even though you weren’t lying, Kushi-chan, back then, you just gave me the role so that I could save face, didn’t you?”

“Well... Let’s just say it’s something like that.”

Kushi-chan seemed apologetic—and she probably truly did feel that way. In the first place, I was the one who asked too much of her by forcibly taking over her role, anyway—since she was keeping her Skill a secret, she would’ve been unable to strongly refuse.

“Well, even so, it’s just as you said, Sukinasaki-senpai. When you said that it’s dangerous to get involved with Kumagawa Misogi, regardless of winning or losing, I was pretty convinced... Ah, but excuse me, if you’ll allow me to apologize for that some other time, I’d like to go back to the main subject. I’ll be continuing the explanation of the rules for Stage 4. For the time limit, let’s make it the time when school closes, the same as it’s always been... So there’s just about five more minutes left. Sukinasaki-senpai, please stay there and relax for just five more minutes. When time’s up, I’ll take you over to the infirmary...”

“That’s really in bad taste, Kushi-chan...” I said with a faint smile appearing on my lips—that smile was really coming from my true personality more than anything, but seeing as I had a mask on anyway, it didn’t show to Kushi-chan. “If you were just going to end up standing in my way after all this, then you may as well have just not acted as a messenger between me and ‘Anshin’in-san’.”

No.

The one that was really in bad taste would be “Anshin’in-san” herself.

On top of making me betray Kumagawa, now she was forcing me to confront Kushi-chan—what, was her hobby to break the bonds that were formed between people?

As if to substantiate that theory, Kushi-chan spoke.

“I had no intention of being a messenger at all, actually... But Anshin’in-san approached me herself, so there was nothing I could do about it. Even that text message was sent because Anshin’in-san told me to.”

“Ah, so that’s what happened... But if you were really thinking of me, then I would’ve liked it if you had the guts to defy ‘Anshin’in-san’...”

“I’m sorry. The best that I could do is just watch over your final moments, Sukinasaki-senpai, so that you didn’t spend them in too much pain.”

“Well, I do think there are other things you can do—”

Saying that, I twisted my body, casually moving my right hand—but there was no way Kushi-chan would overlook that self-proclaimed casual movement.

She spoke almost unconcernedly, without even raising her voice.

“Please stop, Sukinasaki-senpai—If you resist, I will have no choice but to counterattack. Do you not understand why I did something so cowardly by attacking you from behind? Because that was unmistakably the best way that I could go easy on you.”

As long as I’m handling these blades, then if it had turned into a fight with my blades versus your plates, then I wouldn’t have been able to hold

back—was what Kushi-chan said, and those words weren't false.

"Sukinasaki-senpai's Skill—you said it was called 'Error Message Plate'? Just now, I had the opportunity to see how it was used. It's a frightening Skill that allows you to 'rule over the rulers'—but it's not as much of a threat now that I know about it. In short, I just need to avoid getting one of those plates inserted into me, right? If so—then you can't be my opponent."

By saying that I couldn't be her opponent, there was most likely a double meaning to it—in this situation, Kushi-chan was not seeing me as an opponent at all.

She simply thought that I was a victim that had gotten wrapped up with Kumagawa.

That was the kind of girl she was.

That was the kind of good girl she was.

Unlike me—she was a good girl.

"Rest assured, Kushi-chan—it won't become a fight between blades and plates at all."

And then.

I pulled out a revolver, and then cocked it.

A revolver that was much too heavy to hold with just one hand—Teppou Uchi's revolver.

After it accidentally discharged during Russian Roulette in Stage 0, the gun had exploded into bits, but alongside Teppou's medical treatment, Kumagawa had returned it to normal with "All Fiction". In the aftermath, I'd managed to retrieve it.

As a matter of fact, when I was going to face off against Kumagawa in

Stage 2, this had been the “trump card” I’d prepared, thinking that it may be able to be useful—but I never actually thought I would end up pointing the muzzle at Kushi-chan.

“Sukinasaki-senpa—”

“Maybe you’ll be able to repel my plates—but it’s not like you’re the thirteenth-generation Ishikawa Goemon, and no matter how famous those blades are, there’s no way they’ll be able to repel bullets, right!”

I took aim at Kushi-chan—and, at that very moment, I “activated” the plates that I’d inserted into the Kakuremino sisters.

I awakened the two of them that I’d forced to “stay still”—and made them approach Kushi-chan, after making them pick up the chessboards that had fallen to the side to use as weapons.

In other words, an attack from three sides.

A three-pronged attack against her dual-wielding.

Well, the units were different, so there wasn’t really any use in comparing the numbers, but in any case, this was a triple attack with the Kakuremino sisters’ pincer attack and my gunfire—of course, I was a total amateur when it came to shooting, and if it came to shooting with only one hand with my back in the state that it was, there was a good chance that a stray bullet might end up hitting the Kakuremino sisters, but I didn’t really fucking care about that right now.

The Kakuremino sisters brandished their chess boards.

And I pulled the trigger.

“Gh—haaaah! ‘Dancing Danger’!”

As expected, Kushi-chan—no, at this point, even if she was my childhood friend, I couldn’t keep calling her in such a familiar way right now—Yakeishi Kushi, with the katana and the sword in her two hands, swept aside the triple attack that I’d set in motion.

With an elegance that could only be described as a dance—without a sound, she drove off the two sisters, and, miraculously, she managed to

repel the five bullets that I'd managed to shoot straight ahead. Even though I'd said that she wasn't the thirteenth-generation Ishikawa Goemon, perhaps she was worthy of the title of the fourteenth-generation Ishikawa Goemon. Although, that family was all about hereditary succession... But anyway.

That sword dance of hers was well within my expectations.

It would've actually been a fucking problem otherwise.

I could've done something about it later if the Kakuremino sisters had gotten hit by a stray bullet, but I couldn't allow Yakeishi Kushi to be hit by a bullet—the goal of the triple attack was simply to have that sword user focus on me for just one moment.

On me—basically, the goal was for her to look forwards.

In other words, the goal was to make sure that she didn't look “upwards”.

And the sword user, Yakeishi Kushi.

Didn't even have the time to scream.

The ceiling of the classroom that suddenly fell down on her—that pile of debris did not allow Yakeishi Kushi the time to scream at all.

At that moment, the Kakuremino sisters, who had been cut down by Yakeishi Kushi and had fallen onto the floor, had obviously gotten hit as collateral damage, but, well, let's just say they regrettably ended up being sacrifices with no way to dodge.

“The collapse of the ceiling... Of course, this wasn't a coincidence, *Kushi-chan*.”

Towards my childhood friend, who had gotten buried underneath the debris, I used the same tone of voice as always. Well, there was no way she was still listening, but, well, this was something like the etiquette you had in a duel, so I was gonna continue, even while bearing the pain and a

slight amount of embarrassment.

You know, it's that whole thing where manga characters go on and on about their own weaknesses or their evil plans—there are people that like to make fun of it as something that only occurs in manga, but actually, those sorts of “self-introductions” and “speeches” were something that actually occurred normally on battlefields, some hundreds of years ago. Like announcing, “Hear ye, for I am so-and-so from so-and-so Army,” or whatever.

I guess all that “honor” and “pride” stuff didn't really matter anymore in the current era, huh?

Well, as someone who liked to work behind-the-scenes, I did also like to make fun of stuff like that, but right now, since I was standing right in center stage, I might as well act cool for the final scene, at least.

“During Stage 3—that is, just a little while ago, at first, when I tried to stab the older Kakuremino sister's head with 'Error Message Plate', the younger Kakuremino sister blocked it. And that plate ended up stabbing into the ceiling, you see.”

As I spoke, I looked up at the ceiling—though it had mostly collapsed, the part that remained still had the plate stuck in it, just as I'd said.

It was gonna be a pain to get it back.

“You were already watching by then, right, Kushi-chan? Just now, you were acting as if you'd seen it all, Kushi-chan, but—”

“—Who said that the only targets I could control were humans?”

The school itself was *an area that ruled over others*—so there was no way that I wouldn't be able to rule over it, too. Even without this ostentatious usage of “Error Message Plate”—this Suisou Academy had already been under my control from the beginning.

“I ordered the ceiling to collapse—it was fortunate that we didn't have this

battle on the rooftop, like for Stage 2. Because you decided to slice me up from behind and thus move onto Stage 4 immediately after Stage 3, I managed to clear the game thanks to you. You really are someone that does things for the sake of your senpai. Thank you, Kushi-chan."

This had gone all according to plan.

However, whether it had gone according to my plan or to Anshin'in-san's plan... Well, I'll leave that up to your imagination.

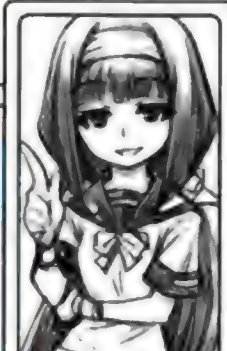
"Don't hate me for this, okay?... I didn't really want to flatten you under the ceiling, either, Kushi-chan, but after you said you were going to go and deal with Kumagawa-kun afterwards, I had no choice. It's far better that you lost to me, instead of winning against him."

I hope we can stay good friends even after this—and just as I said that, with perfect timing, the hands of the clock reached 6 p.m.

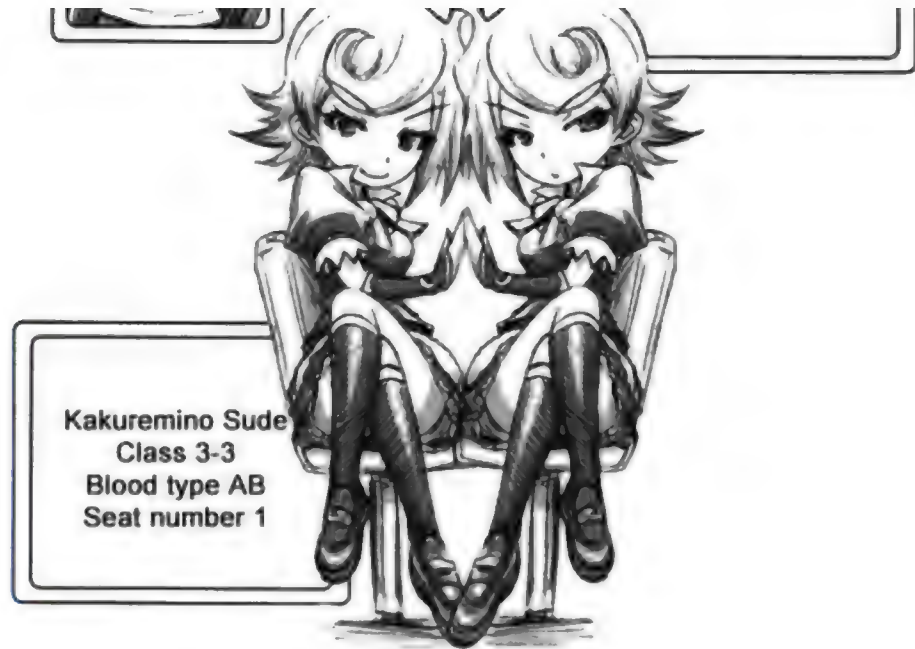
The music for the closing of school for the day began to play—and, once again, it had been yet another peaceful day at Suisou Academy.

Anshin'in-san's Peace of Mind Terminal Introduction ④

I don't plan on giving you a lecture on chess right now. Well, those twins were saying something about imaginary wars and proxy wars, but the biggest difference between chess and actual war would be the number and the types of pieces, and how fair or unfair they are. In reality, it's impossible for both sides to have exactly the same military strength--so you end up forming your strategy based on how to utilize that difference, or perhaps how to make up for it. As someone who has 700 million individual pieces, the number of pieces that Sukinasaki-san held normally wouldn't even compare, and it would have hardly been a fight. But that girl splendidly made up for that gap—it's really commendable. Incidentally, to straighten out something that the Kakuremino sisters seemed to be misunderstanding, the "queen" in chess does not refer to a "female monarch", and it should instead be interpreted as the "consort of the king", or the "queen consort". That's why there's no problem for there to be both a king and a queen on the same side. Of course, Sukinasaki-san probably already knew that when she tried to trap them with it.



Kakuremino Sumi
Class 3-3
Blood type AB
Seat number 2



Epilogue

If this were a game, the ending theme would be playing right about now, but I haven't set up a system like that at all, so you're going to have to put up with my humming, instead.

Congratulations, Kumagawa-kun. You're free to go now.

I've once again managed to fulfill my goal, after all—it seems that your

defeatism will go even this far. And I've managed to figure out why you want to stay at Suisou Academy, too.

Why you want to stay, even if it's not a comfortable place to be at.

Sukinasaki Saki.

That girl is certainly a problem—no, it's not her Skill, “Error Message Plate”, that's the problem, most definitely not. A Skill like that won't be able to defeat me.

It wouldn't be all that frightening—if it were just the Skill itself.

But that girl and the way she uses that Skill could pose a pretty big threat—to the point that I might even feel a sense of danger from it.

Doesn't it seem like things will get interesting?

To be honest, I wanted to kick you out of Suisou Academy immediately, but out of consideration for her, I'll postpone those plans. I ended up wanting to see what would happen. Not that farce that occurred during Stage 2—when Kumagawa Misogi and Sukinasaki Saki face off for real, how will it end? That's what I want to see. Although, that's only if—Sukinasaki-san is willing to show it to me.

Ah, yes, well, I didn't really expect that things would turn out this way, so I never prepared any sort of prize for clearing the game, but since it came to this, go and ask Sukinasaki-san if she wants anything, okay?

I'll naturally give her the “Fool's Katana” as a present, giving it the name of “Sakkihime”^[?], but I'm sure there will be some other special perks that she desires.

Eh? No, I'm not going to grant any of your wishes. It's for Sukinasaki-san only.

Since I did some pretty mean things to her in the end, anything is fine. Even something as absurd as wanting to become an idol—

Play games for one hour a day.

We are the future of society^[?]—but putting that aside, even though the Anshin'in Game ran by “Anshin'in-san” felt like it spanned the length of two months, it turned out to have ended in just four days. And now, it was the following Monday, after going through the weekend.

I, Sukinasaki Saki, came to school early in the morning to perform my duties for today, and I opened the door to the Student Council office—and then I remembered.

“Ah.”

I remembered.

Or rather, I'd forgotten.

In the Student Council office, the Student Council President, Kumagawa Misogi, stood there, frozen in place, as if a statue had been erected to honor his life's accomplishments—with a card embedded near his temple.

“.....”

Oops.

After clearing the game, I'd cleaned up the classroom afterwards—to be precise, I'd stuck some plates into some random students and controlled them into doing the cleaning for me—and then returned home, but I'd forgotten about Kumagawa-kun, who I'd left in the Student Council office. I'd completely and utterly forgotten. There had not even been a sliver of memory left in me.

It seemed that Kumagawa-kun had been frozen here, all through the weekend.

Without eating or drinking...

I'm amazed he didn't die.

Actually, considering Kumagawa-kun didn't have that much of a lust for power, I hadn't really expected that the effect of “Error Message Plate” would last for longer than a day... But, unexpectedly, it seemed that he'd

had enough for his movements to be stopped for a few days or so.

But that meant.

But that meant, if I decided to get serious—wouldn't I actually be able to control this Minus, Kumagawa Misogi, with "Error Message Plate", after all?

A complete puppet, without exaggeration.

Wouldn't that actually be possible—

"...Oh well."

I drew close and grabbed the plate. And, without hesitation, I pulled it out.

"There's no fucking way. Even if I controlled him, it wouldn't be fun at all."

In the same way that removing the vinyl tape from the battery case of a brand-new watch made its hands start moving—as soon as the plate was removed, Kumagawa-kun began to move haltingly.

It was a bit unnatural to describe movements as halting, but considering he'd been frozen for about a three-day period, his muscles had surely gotten stiff, with him collapsing onto the floor of the Student Council office.

[Ah! Oh! Whoaaa!? What's this? Just as I was about to begin my preparations to withdraw from Suisou Academy, it suddenly became Monday! Don't, don't tell me... My Skill transformed into something that lets me warp through time! Now I can go to the future as much as I want!]

He had surely erased his muscle stiffness with "All Fiction", as he had suddenly jumped back to his feet, checking the date on the calendar and saying stuff like that.

He sure liked to do whatever, as always. It almost made me glad that I left him fixed in place this whole time. If anything, rather than just keeping him in place, I'd actually ended up keeping him from getting expelled from the academy, too.

Although, if you asked whether I had any regrets about that, then truthfully, I'd have to say that I did, but... No, in this case, there was no "but" that came after that.

I was regretting it.

And that was it.

Did I really have to protect this guy, to the point that I had to get my back slashed open and fight with my childhood friend...?

At the very least, if I'd realized that Kushi-chan would end up being stationed as the guard for the final stage, I probably wouldn't have gone this far—at least, that was what I thought. From that, it felt like "Anshin'in-san" really had gotten one over on me.

Even though I'd cleared the game, it was hard to say that I'd won.

To say it like how Kumagawa-kun would—once again, I couldn't win.

[Mm. Ah. Aah!] he said.

As if Kumagawa-kun finally arrived at an understanding of his present condition, his shoulders slumped—as for why his shoulders slumped, it was probably because he realized that he didn't gain any sort of time-warping Skill at all.

[I see. So Saki-chan went and cleared the game in my place, for my sake—Anshin'in-san said something like that, too. Thank you.]

"Y-you don't need to say 'thank you'... It was nothing."

I acted bashful, and trembled—pretending to get all hot and bothered.

It was true that I'd acted in his place, but the claim that I'd acted for his sake was something I wanted to vehemently deny. And if we dug too deep into that subject, I was afraid I was gonna have to get into the details of my "Error Message Plate", so I wanted to smooth it over vaguely.

Well, it was possible that "Anshin'in-san" had already told him about it (I couldn't expect any "manners" from her), but in the first place, when he

was dealing with Jakago-san, he'd probably more or less gotten the gist of my Skill then, so there probably wasn't any meaning in hiding it—but this was just the etiquette of a proper lady.

Courteously, or perhaps diplomatically, this was something I should keep hidden.

However, even if getting hot and bothered was just pretending, I truly didn't expect that he would come out and immediately say thanks like this—I'd been expecting him to say something like my meddling was unnecessary.

[How could you say that? I'm an extremely grateful guy. The guy that constantly expresses his gratitude towards his surroundings, that's Kumagawa Misogi.]

"You're just a halfhearted guy, aren't you... Even if you give me your halfhearted thanks..."

[Anshin'in-san didn't really tell me anything in detail, but after that, what happened? How did things get to this point?]

"I mean... There isn't much to talk about. Stage 3 and Stage 4 were both something that anyone would be able to clear, even if it wasn't you, Kumagawa-kun. It would almost be a waste of time to describe it."

[Hmm. Is that so.]

I'd spoken as indifferently as possible in order to cover up the details, but Kumagawa-kun's attitude in his response was even more indifferent.

How little do you care about my adventures?

[Well, things ended without me being expelled from Suisou Academy, so why don't we continue performing our duties as usual? I feel like I won't have to suffer from headaches from now on, too.]

As he said that, he headed for his seat—his indifference, as if nothing had happened at all, was almost disappointing.

It made me fully realize that his words of thanks from earlier really just had been halfhearted.

[Now, now, how long are you just going to stand there and space out, Saki-chan? Get to work already. You really are a useless subordinate, aren't you.]

“Annoying!”

At those words of provocation, I began to think that I really should've just let him go, and that it wasn't too late now to use “Error Message Plate” to control him and get him expelled, but at the same time, I realized.

The pain that I should've keenly felt—*the pain from my back had disappeared.*

The wounds on my back that Kushi-chan had slashed open—I could sense that they had been made as if they'd “never existed”.

“All Fiction'...”

At some point, he must have activated it.

And used it to heal my back—although I honestly felt that, rather than it being a cool act, it was actually kind of repulsive.

I did feel that way, but.

And in this case, what came after the “but” was—

[Now, Saki-chan! Quickly, control me like a chess piece and make me do all the work!]

“Why would you act all high and mighty when you'd be the one being controlled!?”

Well... If I was going to chase him out, then I figured I could do so after working him to the bone.

Ah, jeez.

I'm really no match for Kumagawa-kun, huh!

At this point, there was exactly one month remaining until Suisou Academy was closed down.

And the fact that it closed due to the battle with no winner between the Minus that crawls from chaos, Kumagawa Misogi, and the Minus that controls even chaos, Sukinasaki Saki—of course, that went without saying.

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